



The **London**
Letters

‘Sometimes love finds us
no matter what...’

JAYNE RYAN

A RYANS DEN SHORT STORY

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ST PAUL'S HAS CRACKED

London Darling,

I must say your boyish charm is starting to wear a little thin. I have done as you asked and delivered the first letter. They kept me waiting for ages in the Wren Suite; you know the one, all smoochy archways and wedding paraphernalia.

They asked why you hadn't bothered to deliver the letter yourself and I said because you were busy taking your new designer to lunch on the Orient Express. You can imagine how well that went down!

I tried to change the subject, dribbling on for a bit about how beautiful the restoration was, and then would you believe it; I looked up and noticed a bloody great crack in the ceiling. I know there have been bombs galore and God knows what else since 1711 but couldn't you have used some of that lovely wee gap filler or something. Really unforgiveable!

Look I must see you...I know you keep saying the future will be brighter than a Hatton Garden diamond but I miss our little chats, just the two of us reminiscing about your well lived past. I love watching you recall those very particular moments, your eyes shining, translucent dreams in full flight - remember?

Anyway, I was wandering down Savile Row the other day, looking for some sartorial satisfaction when I suddenly had the urge to belt over to Carnaby Street. As I was alighting from my hideously expensive taxi (must talk to you about my allowance darling!) I saw you know who. And to be honest I'm not sure I can face her again.

She is the recipient of letter number two I take it?

Must go - p.s. I've left you a little something in the oven for dinner...

Where the hell are you?

Kiss Kiss

RED & BLEEDING

London Darling,

I still have no idea where you are.

I've been a bit preoccupied this week anyway. My editor has been dragging me around on a photo shoot of '*all things red*', that would be East End gangs (read dead people), Japanese pickle in my Itsu lunch box and Norman Parkinson models in proper London Red phone boxes. I managed to squeeze five of those stick insects into one booth and scream cheese. What fun!

Afterwards, I found your Luisa lurking down on Eastcheap; somewhat of a comedown for a woman who used to be suited and booted every day. Really, she's hideous darling...anyway I handed her the letter and she snarled at me, like a dog, all punk collar and uneven teeth...should be on a chain, no wonder her husband left her.

She took a long drag on her cigarette, threw it at my feet and told me to stand right where I was whilst she read it. She scribbled some nonsense down and gave it straight back to me.

I'm not forwarding it on darling. You can bloody well buy me a drink and thank me for my time. I think it says something about you owing her money... 'where is it? (the money) and what she'll do to you if you don't pay up. And then something about a sordid night at the Raffles club but I can't quite make it out after '*tied me up...*'

I know I shouldn't have, but I couldn't resist a peek. It's the same letter as the one you asked me to give to the curator at St Pauls last week isn't it? I don't really want to become your debt collector darling!

I thought it my duty to follow Luisa home...she's living in Eaton Square (I'm sure there will be a few curtain-twitchers when they see her comings and goings). I can see where that redundancy cheque went; it must have cost a squillion even if she is only renting.

And you won't believe it but I saw Adam coming down the stairs just as she was going in. I hear his last job; went terribly badly and he ended up decorating some Lord's living room as if Lawrence Llewellyn and a pink poodle had wandered innocently down a dark Mancunian alleyway. Messy, very messy...couldn't help but look him up; he's been deleted from the Chelsea design database and he didn't look very happy.

So, here's the plan. See you at the Fox, 9'ish, mine's a deep-red bloody Mary with a dash of luminous lime and three ice cubes. Don't be late...I'm not kidding!

Kiss Kiss - *Kiss* (feeling a bit French)

MEMENTO MORI

London Darling, she's following me again.

Running madly Darling, trying not to trip but have too much baggage. Oh bollocks, she's spotted me!

Letter number 3...here we go. It's in the letter box, their dog is ripping it up...fabulous. Look I'm not doing this anymore.

What does meet me at the INKubator mean?

Planning something new darling? Might be nice if you let me in on your little secrets! Luisa's been following me again. Growling, sullen, you know how she is...I can't keep a straight face.

She's not happy now that I know where she lives.

She followed me into Liberty the other day. I was looking at some scarves designed by some mad-assed fractilian professor turned screen printer and just when the heavens shone and I found 'the one' she popped up behind the handbags.

Not surprisingly, when the woman in black came over and said 'can I help you Madam'...her punk collar tightened visibly around her neck. Ha! Caught I thought. Who the hell does she think she is. She left sharpish but on her way out a business card fell out of her pocket.

Le Fabricateur : Luxe Design

Mobile : (0)777 1874435

The INKubator

Not planning something I don't know about are you Darling? Because if you are? I'm out for the count. No more favours, little things you want doing.

Gaylord has found us a table for lunch at the Wolseley today, so you better show or that's it. I'm done.

No more kissy kissy for YOU!

WE INTERRUPT THIS BROADCAST

London Darling, I feel your pain.

Last night watching London burn, we talked about how it was just like the blitz; with our families taking up the role of fire wardens during the war - fighting an external enemy.

But this is different isn't it? It comes from within.

This is such a tiny island; with such diversity. There are those who have, and those who have not. There are too many opportunities to rummage through your streets and take from others; leaving people's lives burning in their wake.

Fear controls us all in the end. Please come out of hiding Darling. We need to talk and fix this mess.

Luisa is crying.

I can see her through the window.

Kiss you later!

ASHES TO ASHES

London Darling, a very unattractive man knocked at my basement door early this morning with a nasty looking package. I had to *sign* for it Darling! I called myself Mrs Bridges for a bit of fun. He didn't even look at my name, so I assume he really was just the messenger.

I opened it as there were no instructions this time - just a brown paper wrapping. Inside was a small leather box and inside that was a silver charm in the shape of a fish. Its scales were jointed and wriggled perfectly just like a real one. Its beady little emerald eyes stared up at me.

There was a note as well, which was blank on one side but had some sort of Chinese writing on the other...'*According to Confucius, little fish don't belong in my pond.*'

Under the lid it said '*delivery for Luisa Peregrine, Eaton Square - you know the address.*' I assume this is one of yours but Darling why make *me* open it? What's changed?

Why are you making me do this? You know I've loved your winding river pathways for absolutely ages. I've spent half my life watching your sun pennies twinkling under the willows. Trust me Darling I have felt your pain over the last few years. I know how much it must have hurt to have finally given up that tiny silver fish (albeit a slightly poisoned little fish), too many toxic tears flowing downstream from broken hearts and scorching picnic umbrellas.

You can't fix anything by punishing Luisa, you know that don't you? I'll take it to her but this is the last time.

Goodbye London!

INTERLUDE

The light dims and a lamp burns softly in the corner of Luisa's kitchen. Luisa is on the phone.

'London sweetie, I have someone with me. She can't speak right now; a little bit gagged up and not moving if you see what I mean. Caught her snooping around the back door and the security guards are off for a week in Malaga so it's up to me what I do with her.'

Luisa draws a deep breath - 'Little fishy, little fishy...what a fond reminder.' Do you remember the river flooding that night we walked after dinner. You do don't you. How you tried to gently draw me into your inky waters. 'London – are you there? Are you listening to me? London?'

The line dies. London is still burning with resentment.

TOO RETO, TOO DARK

Well thanks a lot London. If it hadn't been for Luisa's cleaner turning up I'd never have escaped her clutches. Nauseating taste in the dining room by the way; all mock leopard and black, it would take months to redecorate. Noticed a few other little gems as I was running for my life...I think she's house sitting for some oil baron. She couldn't possibly have made all that money since you let her down.

I can't believe you didn't send in the cavalry - I'm quite hurt actually. She went on a lot about you. Told me the story about what happened with Paris one wintry weekend.

Both insulting and hilarious! 'Cheese eating surrender monkeys,' I believe were her exact words. Well we all know that's not true. They wrote it up in the Paris Review the following week.

'Paris nightlife was turned on its head with an evening showing of the latest fabrics and innovative designs made popular by the Chelsea set.' They didn't like them apparently, too retro, too dark for their taste, too London.

Oh and there's a voicemail on my phone from St Paul's. They are calling the Police and want a full investigation into why they are being blackmailed. I'm implicated naturally as I delivered the letter. I'm heading off now, staying at Mothers in the Cotswolds - need a little lie down.

Don't call. I am really very cross!

Kiss (oh and I've found out what's going on at the INKubator)

WHERE IS THE LEADING LADY

Luisa is staring down at London from Greenwich Hill. Why did you let me down so badly? I didn't deserve such a hard time. I was only just twenty. You chewed me up and spat me out.

'Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen, I give you Luisa Peregrine, naive, full of youthful dreams, likes jammy dodgers and custard tarts; let's move her along quite quickly; no sense in mucking about; send her packing I say!'

And so back at the familial home in Sydney, under deep blue, enormous skies, I was left to rot and ponder. Nobody noticing, my spirit flattened by the slow dripping humid thud of eternity.

But here I am London, back to haunt you, and you I - Ghosts everywhere.

Speaking of which, where is our lovely leading lady?

STILETTO BLUES

London Darling,

Mother said to say Hi! I'm safely back in my pied-a-terre. The locks have all been changed so I'm feeling rather cosy for the moment. I had a very lengthy telephone conversation with the Met last Tuesday and I told them I didn't know what was in the letter I delivered to St Pauls. Simply, that I found it on the street; was close by, so I dropped it off.

I think they bought it...but I assume they will be in touch again.

Lots of invitations have arrived in my absence, as you can imagine. One in particular - Luisa has suggested we all get together for a lovely lunch at Claridge's and let bygones be...well bygone!

I still don't trust her but it's better than getting 'tied up' over at hers if you see what I mean.

By the way Roxy are playing tonight - thought I might drop by. Beats watching Brian Eno on Question time again!

Do be a love and stop leaving your things around - broke the heel on my best pair of stilettos tripping up the back stairs!

Ciao Ciao xxx

PHANTOM BLACK

Lily, I feel I must write to you. Thank you for delivering my letters and little packages. Don't worry, all shall be revealed! Luisa is quite right of course, we should meet. I've booked a table at Claridges for 2 o'clock. Be on time, there's a dear - and wear something fitting. This is London's Art Deco Jewel we're talking about. I shall be in black, at my favourite table by the window. I've changed a lot since you last saw me; unrecognizable I'd say. I've retained my original character of course but have a far more relaxed look about me. More European perhaps?...or not...depends whose side you are on.

Luisa will be prickly; she's bound to have a trick or two up her sleeve. So let's keep the conversation a little William Morris, a little DaDaesque if you see what I mean. She loves that sort of thing. Oh and I've picked up a few things from the LDC this week. A gorgeous Hollywood set lamp and a rug. Thought they might add a little splash à votre appartement. You really do live in such a dull part of town dearest. We must get you something more exotic.

I shall be carrying a hat box with a large black bow. When I leave, I shall place the box at your feet. Take it home and study the contents carefully. Don't let Luisa railroad you into opening it at the table.

Now au revoir my love...

Till then - till 2!

ART DECO DREAMING

Of course, on the day, London doesn't show. Lily and Luisa sit facing each other; grim and sullen across the beautifully laid table. The hat box sits between them on the 3rd chair like a sentinel. From inside the box, a scent, a whisper; appealing to each woman to gently untie the bow.

Neither moves, both know one of them will have to pick up the bill, a gesture neither can afford. But they have ordered drinks and the meal must proceed, no face lost, the maquillage in tact.

Lily speaks first...'I don't know how you think you can get away with holding me hostage. London will come after you.'

'Oh Lily, Lily...Lily...' Luisa sips at her gin and tonic then bites down hard on an ice-cube with her front teeth. 'Don't take everything so seriously. It's just a little game. No one will get hurt - well, not badly anyway!'

Lily twirls her fork slowly around her fingers. 'Let's go back to the beginning - tell me more about you and London in Paris.'

The afternoon passes, the light outside is fading; a few early September leaves have fallen onto the window sill. A warm gentle breeze moves through the trees and in the distance Lily can see a couple riding their horses across the expanse of the park.

The meal is complete. It has been delicious, well-timed. Lily has been listening to Luisa for over 2 hours and now with a small shining pot of coffee in front of her, she is feeling sleepy, hypnotised by Luisa's gravelly voice, lifting, falling away with each breath.

Lily looks out and thinks she sees London under the trees; moody, restless, spying. She smiles prettily to herself and notices a quivering at the corner of Luisa's right eye.

'Thanks Sweetie, my treat...' Lily throws the plastic card onto the silver tray. The tray is expertly swept up.

Now Dear Reader all we have to do is wait.

NIGHT OF DARK ENVY

So London, Darling, I did as you asked. Luisa tried to snatch the hat box before we left. But I held on tightly and have it with me now, here on the floor, surrounded by candles. I have untied it and have read your note.

'Join me for a night of dark envy, my dearest Lily...Luisa and I are to be married! I choose her not you. You know we would lose the thing that binds us if we were to marry. I ask you simply to carry the rings on the eve of our betrothal, on a rather nice blue velvet cushion I picked up at Portobello.

What do you say?'

Inside the hat box, wrapped in thin, white tissue is a tiny bluebird charm bracelet, engraved on the back with the letters 'LLL' (London Loves Lily?)...or Luisa? Is this another one of his jokes?

Lily sits silently, the candles burning away to nothing, the dregs of a glass of red wine catching the light with the colour of her heart, blood pumping, filled with sorrow, she writes back and places the note in the box.

'Yes - London. I will.'

LONGING

The night of the wedding is upon us. Lily has determined to steel herself against all emotion, simply to perform her duty as ring bearer. She dresses carefully in an emerald silk sheath, jade bracelets dangling around her wrists, clinking silver as she walks.

She clips a single peacock feather in her hair as a talisman, a reminder of her own pride. Her eyes are outlined in smoky grey charcoal but her lips are bare and unsmiling.

London is in grey, the colour of morning mist, trembling slightly in fear of Luisa's wrath lest he decides to bolt, leaving her at the altar with Lily to watch her unfolding humiliation.

London's mood swings back and fro, bleeding long-lost loves from his memory in order to partake of Luisa and all she brings. Her false gaiety, her beauty... but it's mostly her mischief London can't resist.

At Southwark Cathedral, guests have started to arrive; music from the gothic nave drowns out the small party. The venue is far too large but London has insisted this is the right place for the proceedings. Lily arrives on foot, checking in her small pocketbook for the rings. They burn in the palm of her hand. She is tempted to murmur a spell, allow her venom to taint their golden finish - but she resists. She knows London and Luisa will have enough of their own battles to fight.

Candles have been lit at the altar, everyone is seated. The music suggests Luisa's arrival is imminent - the small party turn their heads towards the main doors, and sure enough Luisa is resplendent in a hood and cape, almost as light as dandelion dust. To her right is a tiny child, eyes still moist from recent weeping, his hand outstretched to join Luisa's. The music dies...

ANGEL'S DARE

London hasn't quite made it to his position at the altar. He looks Luisa squarely in the eye and waving 'adieu' he turns on his expensive black heels and slowly departs through the antechamber.

He cuts a fine figure from behind; sartorially speaking they don't come any finer. Luisa opens her mouth to shout something in his direction but thinks better of it.

Instead she takes the child's hand, which is still in mid-air and drags him outside towards the wedding car. It has rained during this interlude and her dress skims the muddy pools, glistening and rippling with the shocked faces of the small congregation. They have begun to follow after her to offer some condolence.

She glares hotly in their direction, hitches up her skirts, pushes the child into the car and tells the driver to take them immediately to the most expensive hotel he can think of.

'Step on it buddy - the kids going to start screaming any moment now!'

Lily is sitting quietly in the front pew. Her hands clasped tightly together around the wedding rings. She looks front-forward, the beauty of the stained glass window has her mesmerized. The pastor asks her if she is okay, can he help in any way?

'No thank you, so kind, but actually everything is just fine, really fine...' and she shines like an angel with her wings blazing behind her.

DOLLS EYE

Lily still can't quite contain her mirth. After the wedding she sends Luisa a small crisp white card with the following word -

'Gotcha.'

On the back she simply states the time and place for the assignation she knows Luisa won't be able to resist.

'Wed 12 noon. Pagoda – Kew Gardens'

London, back in his lair, is licking his wounds. Blood red and raw, his emotions boil inside him. What a fool to think Luisa would seriously consider nuptials without some sort of catch.

That sullen child had resembled him slightly, perhaps the delicate cheek bones, the almond, doll-like eyes - but she would never be able to prove it. His DNA was his alone to scrutinise.

He then does something very strange. He never usually wears colour but today he takes out a balloon-blue bow tie from his dressing room drawer, a pale lemon shirt and a grey jacket. He puts them on and for some reason decides to part his hair on the opposite side.

'There...he murmurs to himself. I look more like father material. Let's see what you have to say to me now, Luisa.'

Dear Reader, I will shortly introduce a poem for your degustation. Our characters so far have been wildly running, willy-nilly, hither and thither; but the real reason they can't leave each other alone is about to be revealed. You may have already guessed?

LONDON'S POEM

1929 across the fields of France

My speeding train completes its rhythmic dance...

This is my bloom

Finding the room

Blessed the groom

Faith in the tomb

Reach for the moon

Listen for Love

London & Luisa

SHADES

It's 1929, just before the crash on Wall Street, London and Luisa are newly-wed. Paris is in turmoil and Lily has just celebrated her 19th birthday.

This little group is a chimera, 'une collage de trois' for they are; all three, ghosts, shades.

Lost in time, drowned in the Seine, on a night that had sparkled and crackled under the moon, their boat was struck by an object no one saw. No one survived.

Now, in the gold autumn light, in the here and now, London's energy brings them all together again. The letters and little packages he posts, are the only way to snare the living into the dreams of the dead.

He has enlisted Lily as his aid and Luisa who is lost to him forever, to close the loop, to second a caretaker for their memoirs, mementos, enshrine them, dissolve them; set them free.

Lily and Luisa stand adjacent to the Pagoda in Kew Gardens. Lily takes out the wedding rings and hands them to Luisa as a gesture of peace.

'God forbid you think I want those!'

'Well I certainly don't. What am I supposed to do with them?' 'Pawn them - I don't care - he is toast to me, gone, deader than dead.'

'I know you don't mean that. What about your son?'

'Not my son. His – perhaps?' Luisa has a glint in her eye.

London appears from behind Lily. The glare of the sun in her eyes, Luisa is having trouble seeing who it is.

'Well here we are, again, together. Time to go Luisa, Lily. Time's a ticking, London whistles a tune they both recognise...'*don't know where, don't know when!*'

LOVE FOR LILY

In the same way the line flows from her neck, through the back of her dress, down to the heel of her stiletto; a line unbroken, a certain perfection, rightness about it, parts become as one; London's energy is ebbing away, he needs to get a grip.

For Lily is about to do a runner and quantum entanglement won't save them this time.

UN PEU PEUR

London watches as Lily walks away.

The cape she is wearing swings in waves behind her in an ocean of regret. She can't stop, won't stop. He can't win this time.

London has already turned away from Luisa.

He knows they are finished, she won't come with him; but Lily - Lily is still hooked, still wanting, still alive in her desire for him, even as she walks toward the lake.

He calls her name on the wind, she hears but keeps walking. Soon he is beside her. Her heart has slowed, the moment is catching fire, she's ready to leave. The future is just a short quantum leap across the bridge and she knows she can make it without him.

'Wait! Lily! We're not done yet.'

She turns, her eyes blazing. 'Welcome to my world London.' Lily makes the jump.

THE OTHER SIDE OF NIGHT

Lily's heart stopped momentarily. London sat beside her on the crunchy, frozen grass. Sheets of newspaper blew around their feet as the wind battled to find them, assault them.

He had chosen her in the end, left Luisa behind to her own devices. And the child? Was it his?

Lily smiles at London. He is looking old and worn, the vitality he had as a young man has ebbed away without her really noticing.

'Why are you doing this London? What possible good can come from chasing our tails down the years. No-one cares now - it's all too late.'

London pushes a dark forlock out of his eyes. She notices he still wears the ring Luisa gave him when they first met. 'I can't let it go Lily...if I do then that really is the end.'

A small bird lands beside them and trills a sweet tune to a mate somewhere off in the distance. 'See!' says London – 'you have to keep calling; you never know who might answer.'

FEED ME RED

Luisa re-reads the poem she has just received from London.

'Free speech, let me fly across the vacuum you call the world, heavy feet plodding the planet with hair blazing red in the wind, ah the wind, strong with love and hope, blowing away the cobwebs of musty death and decay, scattering dandelion dust, away, for the portents are read.'

She guesses he will soon return and hides the note paper in her bottom drawer.

LOSING LUISA

The little boy Luisa had dragged to her wedding with London, was not in fact London's son. Simply a borrowed accessory but nonetheless a boy enamoured with Luisa's power to change lives. After she left him, alone, 8 years old in that vast hotel, someone had eventually claimed him; an official from the fostering association. He had been missing for over a week and the lady who had come to take him out for the day, vanished, for what must necessarily be forever.

Let's call him Romy. Let's say he grows up to be not only a clever businessman but also a collector of beautiful things. He lives in Belgium, alone but happy, surrounded by things, things that make his heart sing. But Luisa is not entirely forgotten. Romy has the London Letters, he knows there are loose ends to tie up. But for now we have time to learn a little more about this foreign child.

THE CAT'S MEOW

Across the way, across the glass-topped canal, Romy can hear the yowling cry of a demented cat. He closes the window, draws the curtains and threads his arms into his greatcoat. He picks up his cane, his gloves and wanders down into the still, quiet of the night. He has in his pocket a small totem; for luck or safety he doesn't really know. He feels it with cold fingers; exits his front door and turns the key in the lock.

It's late but he needs to visit the woman who listens, who provides strong drink; who lets him sleep deep into the morning whilst she has already gone, merged into the dank of the winter's day, the flow and ebb of those who do the real work of the world.

Slowly he has immured a small night bag, a carry-all into the dark recesses of her closets. She has noticed but says nothing, for at the end of it all, she is more than a comforting voice; she loves him but cannot say why.

The clickety clack of his heels on cobblestones reverberates across the soundless streets; he feels warm at the thought of her soft dark hair touching his face as they kiss. As he turns the corner his phone rings loudly, disturbing the night, disturbing the cat's meow.

CAUSE CELEBRE

Romy leaves the apartment late. The day seems to have galloped ahead of him and his legs feel heavy. The world is quiet; an ice-cold interlude. The sky is waiting to shake its snowy eider-down across the town.

He struggles with a large parcel, wrapped in brown paper and string. It's neither square nor rectangular and refuses to fit neatly under his arm. Nearing the door of Gallery Deux, he stops momentarily, digs into his pocket for the name of the owner on a piece of torn newspaper and continues up the stairs.

Inside, the low light dilutes the essence of the painting as he unveils it in front of Monsieur Verlour.

Romy holds it up, walks over to the white gallery space to his right, finds the perfect combination of light and shadow and places it against the wall. The doll's eye shines in the light, for all the world like a tiny painted universe of its own. He takes out a knife and slashes the painted face. Behind the canvass is a small packet, an envelope. He reaches in and pulls out the letters.

'I can't sell these, Romy. You must know the letters are the last clue. It's been all over the news. Where on earth did you get them?'

Romy stood perfectly still. Monsieur Verlour turned to pull the shutters down on the front door with one hand and slid the heavy iron lock into place with the other.

The End

Dear Reader,

The London Letters originally started as a series of blog posts and is now being worked into a novella.

In the mean-time if you like what you see here, you may like to try a free download from my website of my new novella - **'Wisdom Is The New Black'**.

Hope to see you soon, and don't forget to join my mailing list for pre-release notices and updates!

Love

Jayne

Kiss Kiss xxx