

The Souls of Clarkson's Asylum

Berkshire, England

Clarkson's Center for Post-War Rehabilitation

1945

This is the tale of a Ms. Clara Jane Ross. She was a pretty, affable seventeen year old, with a remarkable talent for depicting the world through her ink sketches. Poor child, orphaned by the war... No one knew what to do with her, and orphanages were withering away by the second, too overflown to care.

So she ended up in that dump: Clarkson's Asylum.

Clara didn't mind it much; the odd characters provided a profusion of drawing inspiration. Clarkson's stood as a little reclusive world within itself, completely isolated. A brick building trademarked by the scent of longing, of remembrance. Not a single soul lived without the raging effects of loss on the mind. Except, of course, Clara.

One could spend hours talking about everyone at Clarkson's, from those who wore their profound pain like a badge, to those who buried it deep within their eyes. Those mentioned in this tale are merely Clara's closest companions.

Mrs. Lizzy Cox, a despondent widow from London who lost her entire family to military drafts (a husband and three sons). She hadn't spoken in three years.

Lieutenant Markson, an unrelenting soldier and a perfect shot. Clara heard the screams that came from his room every night, like the shrieks of a haunted child.

Lady Samantha Bradford, Clara's favorite of the three. Sam was born of obscene wealth; she'd been prepared to embark on a ship to America the moment the noble class got an inkling of the coming war. Instead, she jumped off the boat, maddened by a voice in her head.

Every morning, Clara walked into each of their rooms with a sage-scented puff pastry, some coffee, and strawberry jam.

“Good day, Mrs. Lizzy,” Clara smiled sweetly and passed her friend the tray. Lizzy sat by the window in one of her usual flower print dresses, gazing blankly at the distance. Lizzy was more of a shell than a real woman, and her tiny stature and silent demeanor didn't help. Clara suspected Lizzy to be in her late fifties, but the wrinkles and graying hair could just as easily be the products of too many sleepless nights. She had a tremulous nature, shaking at the sound of each falling leaf. The mucky green lawn was no beautiful sight, especially considering the graves that had been half-heartedly planted upon it. What an odd thing, how the current inhabitants stared at the deathbeds of their predecessors, those who had just given up on life completely.

Clara wondered what impelled Lizzy to spend her existence viewing a landscape. Perhaps she imagined her husband and sons coming home in their uniforms after the war ended, grinning at all the times gone by. “Remember to take your pills, honey. They'll keep you strong.” Clara said.

Gosh, Clara thought. Women like Lizzy don't need pills. There's just about nothing stronger than a woman who survived such horrors.

Next, Clara made her way to Lieutenant Markson's room. His room stood just across the hall, decorated with hundreds of photographs of his time at war. Some of his old guns even hung on floating shelves. Nothing seemed amiss in the daytime. Markson carried himself with the confidence of a middle-aged man, despite being only a few years above twenty himself. He lived in such a practical, prudent, and proper way: hair gelled back, shirts ironed and pressed. Hardly the same psychotic soldier who screamed his lungs out at night. “Good morning, Lieutenant.”

“Good day, Clara!” He gave her a confident grin. “I feel simply radiant. Today I'll be freed from this madhouse, I'm sure of it.”

Clara sighed. He said that each day. "Ah, and just when I thought you were starting to like it here." She left the tray by his bedside and strolled towards the door.

"Don't you ever dream of getting out?" His words stopped her. "Surely a sweet girl like you dreams of college or marriage or something?"

"I turn eighteen in December. I plan to board a ship to art school in New York the minute I do." A wide smile spread across Clara's face, brightening her whole demeanor. "I suppose it would be nice to have someone to run away with." Lieutenant Markson only frowned.

Lastly, her morning ended with Lady Sam. Sam stood at her desk every morning, scribbling pages and pages and pages, her irascible personality causing her to throw away notebooks at a time. Sam said that "the voice" wrote for her, filling each section with a line more heartbreaking than the last. "Hello, Sam."

"Hello, Clara Jane," Sam replied as she got up from her desk, brushing off the messy space around her. In moments like these, Sam's beauty almost completely masked her madness. Her green eyes paired perfectly with the ginger locks that wrapped around her thin figure.

"How did your morning writing go?"

"Alright. Mary has been oddly quiet today. It's unlike her, you see. That audacious child!"

No one in the asylum knew much about Mary, despite how frequently Sam spoke of her. Clara found it interesting; Mary grew with every word Sam spoke about her. She was more of a fairy, less of a person.

That day, Mr. Charles Crookshanks arrived at the asylum. Handsome, smart, and nineteen, Charles had planned for a university education. Somewhere preppy, probably.

Unfortunately, the war had other plans. Now, he was just another child turned into a man by war instead of life. After coming home to his family and bride-to-be, they discovered his newfound spurts of anger. A different person had come back from the army— one that his girl no longer wanted to marry. So, Charles ended up at Clarkson's with the rest of the desperate souls who had lost their lives to the war.

Luckily for Clara.

She just called him Charlie. Well, not *just*. Because, simply put, Charles Crookshanks was the love of Clara Jane Ross's life. Between his army muscles and California blonde hair, one couldn't blame her. What an odd thing love is.

But Charles left, as young boys always do. You see, Clara had been blessed with beauty. But no man would marry a miss without parents or a penny, regardless of how pretty. Charles left her alone and heartbroken, with none but the deranged to keep her company. So, she turned to her old friend: Ms. Sam.

On a chilly November morning, even the trees seemed to tremble in the autumn wind. Clara knocked on Sam's door, cheeks puffy and pink.

"Good day, Sam."

"Oh, hello my Clara," Sam turned around from her desk. She too had watery eyes and wiped away a tear as she spoke to Clara. "How has your morning been, my darling?"

"Fine," Clara lied. "Are you alright, Miss Sam?"

"It's just... ah, never mind. It's a silly story anyway." Clara sat on Sam's bed, inviting her friend to come sit beside her.

"I would love to hear it."

Sam smiled at Clara's words and sat next to her on the lavender-colored sheets.

"Ever since your Charlie left, I couldn't help but think of my James." Sam's eyes glittered as she began the tale, as if reaching for a dying memory.

"James?" Clara asked.

"My husband back in London. Died of illness. Handsome devil, left me with a child on the way." Sam chuckled, her voice losing its sanity little by little.

"With Mary?"

"Yes. You know, they didn't think it would be appropriate to raise her on my own with no husband by my side. Said I'd be outcasted by society, blacklisted by any possible suitors. So they killed her." Samantha sobbed now, screaming. "*They killed my baby*. But I had to get off that ship, because I found her. I couldn't leave my darling in England, not when her voice is so clear." "Sam..." Clara's voice broke. "I'm pregnant." Sam stood up, her eyes turning bloodshot.

"Oh my beautiful Clara Jane, get the hell out of my room. Right now."

That night, three figures crept into Clara Jane Ross's bedroom: a broad-shouldered soldier, a short woman, and a slim young lady with ginger hair. Together, they had raised Clara.

And now, they had lost that little girl to the cruelties of the world. She'd been tainted, broken, and hurt. Her eyes were no longer bright like those of a little child. They glimmered with memories, instead of dreams. With heartbreak instead of love. Time does that to everyone.

How long can a child keep their innocence when raised among madmen?

These three figures had entered quietly, with one purpose and one purpose only. All three of them had eyes that glittered. With sorrow, with pain. These were people who had no semblance of childhood in their melancholy and lonely lives. Every inch of purity had died in the war.

Lizzy's family.

Sam's baby.

Markson's youth.

But they all still had Clara: their beautiful brown-haired girl who loved nothing the way she loved her sketches. Until the cursed Charles Crookshanks entered their lives. *He* killed their

Clara. So, the soldier raised his arm, lifting a gun at this new monster who inhabited their little darling's bed.

Bang.

Straight in the head. *A perfect shot.*

Blood splattered across the bedroom, spritzing the ink drawings hung up on the walls. Drawings of New York, of the life Clara could have led.

To them, it mattered little. These people couldn't bear seeing another child turned into an adult. Another soul tainted by the war. When a country is desecrated by a war, no one is looking toward the future. Their lives were stuck in the past, so they just kept resisting the future in hopes that the past would return.

That's why they stared at windows, why they screamed in the night, why they heard the voices of children who were long dead.

And isn't that the definition of insanity?