

Obituary 07: Mei Died

Obituary Writer (Voiceover): Hello. I am the oddly-intriguing Obituary Writer of this quaint town of Crestfall, Idaho, and this is *Death by Dying*.

[slowly fade in the ambience of OW's apartment. soft muted rain against the window, a ticking clock, a dose of thunder. outside in the distance, the blare of a fire truck goes by.]

OW VO: These days my apartment feels like a strange and lonely corner of the world. The pickled frogs and stuffed squirrels on my shelves seemed to silently judge me as I poured myself yet another amber cognac all the way to the rim of the glass.

[liquid pours into a glass]

OW VO: My Egyptian Silk tie hung on the hook of my armoire. The top button of my burgundy dress shirt was unbuttoned, displaying an amount of exposed collarbone I would only reveal in the privacy of my own home. I glared at The One Who Glares.

The One Who Glares: *(meow)*

OW VO: He meowed softly and glared back. We reveled in the activity of glaring for a moment.

OW: What are you glaring at?

OW VO: I asked.

The One Who Glares: *(gentle meowing)*

[cozy, musing, rainy evening music. room ambience fades.]

OW VO: Living with cats is like having roommates who either utterly despise you or love you to death, but you aren't entirely sure which.

[meowing abound from all three man-eating cats]

OW VO: And when you live with three *man-eating* cats, hatred and love start to seem equally threatening. Sometimes I wake up to them licking my face. Is it a gesture of affection, or are they sampling me in case one day I decide to sleep in? Who knows, who knows... For better or for worse, their personalities are beginning to present themselves. The One Who Hunts has decided she is the leader of the pack—

The One Who Hunts: (*short confident MRAH!*)

OW VO: —and stalks the night in search of recently-deceased townsfolk who have yet to be discovered by Crestfall Law Enforcement. The One Who Glares sits on my balcony and hisses at passersby.

The One Who Glares: (*taunting HISSSS!*)

OW VO: Some of his hisses are starting to sound strikingly like words. And The One Who Sulks—

The One Who Sulks: (*a woebegone meeeooooowwww...*)

OW VO: —has declared she is going vegan. We shall see how long that one lasts.

[*cozy music fades. room ambience fades back in. ice clinking in OW's glass as he takes a sip of cognac and sighs.*]

OW VO: I turned my attention to the jam jar on my shelf. Inside was a heart, a human heart, a heart still-beating and coursing with blood. The heart of Charlotte Dawson. Somehow, somehow, this was my ticket to bring Charlotte back to life. I unearthed her body, I have her heart, but I still need to find her spirit before I can truly bring her back. Wherever could her soul be hiding? I closed my eyes and listened to the steady beat.

[*room ambience fades. silence. then – her heartbeat. we linger on it, listening, being present with it... then the room returns.*]

OW VO: Funny how one heart can break another.

[*glass clinking, OW takes another sip*]

OW VO: In an oakwood drawer, buried beneath my Sunday afternoon hosiery, is the draft of Charlotte Dawson's obituary. Unpublished. As far as anyone knows, she was just a girl who got lost in the woods and couldn't find her way out, until it was too late. And in a way, that was true.

[OW takes a final gulp, ice sliding in a now-empty glass]

OW VO: I downed the rest of my cognac.

OW: *(hiccup!)*

The One Who Glares: *(judgemental meow)*

OW: Pardon.

[gradually building staccato violin begins, hopeful and inspired, reminiscent of Rocky Balboa preparing for a fight, but orchestral and in the world of Crestfall]

OW VO: Despite my state of inebriation and intoxicating sorrow, I re-buttoned my burgundy dress shirt and guided a new tie to my collar with the ease of a seasoned pilot landing a plane on the world's narrow-est runway.

[fabric slides as the knot is tied. the flap-flap of OW putting on his suit jacket and straightening it out.]

OW VO: I donned my finest tweed jacket and ran a comb through my perfectly-coiffed hair. It is time...

[hype music crescendos and is cut off by a sliding typewriter carriage being reset to the left of the page. OW sits down. all this build-up for...]

OW VO: –for me to write a new obituary.

[melancholic piano music, back to your regularly scheduled obituary. typewriter keys typing away...]

OW VO: Mei Lou, 63, passed away peacefully in the night... after burning to death–

[music cuts for an EXPLOSION of flames and flying brick, before returning]

OW VO: –in a fire that destroyed her entire home. She was the owner and head chef at Lou’s Chinese Cuisine, where the food is flawlessly crafted into what can only be described as a party for the tastebuds. Mei lived (and died) above the restaurant, with a view over Birdbiddle Lake and the wharf that curves along the shoreline. Mei was kind but stubborn. Her extensive vocabulary was more than highly proficient at knowing more curse words than most people learn in a lifetime. She wanted everyone to please note her change of address, now behind the Church of Right Here Right Now, two graves down from her mother’s. She is survived by her next of kin, Fen Lou, who said of their mother:

Fen: It’s for the best she died in a fire. She always wanted to be cremated. My grandmother was Buddhist, my mother was Christian, and I’m an atheist. She figured if my grandmother was right, she would overcome suffering. If she was right, she would be rewarded for suffering. And if I was right, she would make a good mantle decoration.

OW VO: I sat with Fen in the middle of the now blackened and still-slightly-smoldering Lou’s Chinese Cuisine. They claimed they were down by the docks working on their art the night their mother passed... But something seemed... off. Fen was guarded and aloof. But I wasn’t sure why...

[melancholic music ends. fade in the crackling of some remaining flames from the fire.]

OW: Were you and your mother close?

Fen: If by close you mean in proximity, then yes. I lived in very close quarters with her my entire life. If by close you mean emotionally, then no. I lived in very close quarters with her my entire life.

OW: You don’t seem particularly bothered by her death.

Fen: She bothered me enough when she was alive. She wanted me to be just like her. I don’t have to worry about that anymore.

OW: Hmm... Seems pretty convenient you weren’t here when the fire happened.

Fen: Weren’t you the one who found that girl in the Dark Woods? What was her name? Charlotte? Charlotte Dawson?

[crackling fire fades away as dark, suspenseful ambient music comes in]

OW: ...Yes. Yes I was. But I don't see how any of this has to do with—

Fen: And what did you say happened again?

OW: Sh—She got lost. She died before she could find her way out.

Fen: Find a lotta dead bodies in the woods, do ya, Obituary Writer?

OW: I...

Fen: Hm. Well, I suppose I'll just have to take your word that you weren't there when Charlotte died, just the same as you'll have to take my word that I wasn't here when my mother died...

[a whooshing impact brings us back to the still-slightly smoldering room]

Fen: Sound good?

OW VO: I nodded the slightest of nods.

Fen: Good. My lawyer has advised me not to say more.

OW: Your lawyer?

Mia: That would be me.

[Mia Jasper's theme music – sneaky, investigative, quirky, a nice funky bass. you can't pull a fast one on this gal.]

OW VO: From the shadows emerged a flock of jagged blue hair, a torn leather jacket, and a pair of eyes that made you feel as though you were being an idiot in a way that couldn't be remedied. It was Mia Jasper, the criminal law student, who also lived above Lou's Chinese Cuisine before the untimely fire. I may have accused her of murdering someone a while back. Perhaps she doesn't remember.

Mia: You think I killed this lady too?

OW VO: Okay, maybe she remembers.

[Mia's theme ends, pizzicato mystery music begins]

OW: So... you passed the bar exam.

Mia: Obviously.

OW: Congratulations.

Mia: Yeah, thanks, I'm a genius apparently. Anyway, don't talk to my client. Figure something else out. We gotta go over their mom's last will and testament, and it's testing my last will to get it done. Come on, Fen.

[Fen and Mia's footsteps shuffle over ash]

OW VO: Just like that, Mia walked away with my only lead, guiding them to the back office. Surely the fire wasn't an accident. Not completely. Even mistakes begin with intentions – whether they be good or bad. Good intentions can just as easily result in disaster. Like offering a guest coffee and spilling it all over their cashmere sweater.

[a coffee mug clinks and liquid spills everywhere]

Surprised Spilled-Upon Lady *(in the tone of "Oh my word!")*: Oooh!

OW VO: Or giving a tourist directions and watching helplessly as they walk into a wood chipper.

[wood chipper grinding, a man's scream being cut short by a burst of blood and guts]

OW VO: Or trying to be a good friend and tearing their heart out.

[pizzicato mystery music fades]

OW VO: Something, or someone, had to spark the flame. I tugged at the scarf around my neck. Nothing like "no clues" to make an Obituary Writer sweat. How do you solve a potential murder when you can't even speak to your one and only suspect?

[sneaking-down-an-alleyway, private-eye-type jazz. it sounds like the music OW would hear in his head or sing to himself while he's sneaking.]

OW VO: Eavesdropping while lurking in alleyways is always a perfect alternative to socializing. It is, after all, my preferred way to attend parties. Down the alleyway behind Lou's Chinese Cuisine, I counted the windows of the ground floor, *(counts match the beat of the music)* one... two... three, right to the back office. An unidentifiable heap below the cracked window gave me just enough of a boost to peer inside.

[sneaky jazz ends with a cheeky organ. alleyway ambience as OW peeks inside.]

Fen: Thank you for taking care of all this, Mia.

Mia: Of course.

Fen: I know... my mother was... particular.

Mia: Her will was a 7-part memoir.

Fen: Yes, she had me write the advanced praise.

Mia: Then I'm sure you're aware of her final wishes.

Fen (sighing): That I inherit the family business? Yeah. She mighta mentioned it.

Mia: Right, so it'll just take a few signatures to transfer everything, then we can start on how this fire happened in the first place, in case we have grounds for a lawsuit—

Fen (interrupting): Mia, I'm not really interested in the business, and I'm even less interested in how it burned down. I'm just looking to collect the insurance money.

Mia: Fen, I lost everything in that fire too—

Fen: I understand, but...

Wild Man: EERRR!

OW (yelping in surprise): Ah!

[shifting, falling, thudding. OW sprawls on the ground.]

Wild Man: EEEEEH! OWWW!

OW VO: It was at this moment that the unidentifiable heap that I had mounted for a better view came to life.

Wild Man: No stepping on the Wild Man! WildManisnotforsteppingon! Except on Tuesdays at normal business hours! And no solicitors! Hm!

OW: My apologies, Mr. Wild Man. I thought you were an unidentifiable heap.

Wild Man: Ohh, why thank you! (*chuckling madly*) Now scram-a-lam, okay? I'm trying to become a perfect human sphere. (*struggling efforts, workin' on that human sphere*) Hm mmm hermm mmmm.

OW: I'm simply investigating the fire that happened recently.

Wild Man: The fire! Ohhhh... then—then Human Sphere can wait.

OW VO: The Wild Man quickly unfurled and stood alert on all fours.

Wild Man: Yes... yes yes yes, Wild Man knows. Oh the big flamey burn! Writer of obituaries... come... closer.

[*OW takes a few steps closer*]

Wild Man: Clossseerrrrr.

[*more footsteps*]

Wild Man: Even (*whispers*) closssseeerrrrr.

[*shuffling. OW couldn't possibly get any closer.*]

Wild Man (*whispered*): *so close...*

OW VO: We were touching noses.

Wild Man: The Wailing... Wharf... Widow.

[*a high-pitch stinger launches us into the Wailing Wharf Widow theme – crackling static, a looping cursed chorus like a record player skipping*]

Wild Man: Eight feet tall. A chilling specter. *The love of my life*. She haunts these curs-ed shores. Makes things go boom without lifting a finger. No match, no dyn-o-mite. No nothing. Just – FIRE.

OW: Are you talking about... a spontaneously-combusting ghost?

Mia: Hey!

[*dunnnn! a classic cheesy movie orchestra jump scare.*]

OW: (*ugly high-pitched scream, grunted sigh like “Bro you just scared me so bad”*) Mia...

Mia: Ya lost, deadbrain?

OW VO: Mia Jasper leered at me from the window.

OW: N-no, I was merely–

Mia: Well, if you aren't lost now, go get lost!

[*window slam!*]

OW VO: I looked down to discover the Wild Man had turned back into a near-perfect sphere and was no longer perceptible as human.

Wild Man (*muffled from inside human sphere*): *Herrmmm... three sixtyyy!*

OW VO: I needed to ground myself. I needed to return to the warm cozy blanket of cold hard facts. There was only one meat-grinding corpse expert to go to in times like these.

[*an intriguing tango, complete with cello and accordion. welcome to the Butchery everyone.*]

Butcher (*taking a deep breath, sniffing*): Ahhh... Ya smell that? That's the smell of death right there. Yep, she is definitely dead. Wow. Real dead.

OW VO: The local Butcher, who also happens to be the town coroner, stood in the back of his butchery, where he performs his secret autopsies. The charred remains of Mei Lou were sprawled on a metal table. She looked like an overdone piece of toast.

[the lever of a toaster slides down, the tick-tick-tick of the timer...]

OW VO: At any second she could collapse into dust.

[the toaster DINGS! overlaid with the PAHHHH! of a dying breath]

OW VO: Small slithers of glowing embers ran up and down her arms and across her face. Her mouth was wide, a scream frozen by fire... The Butcher seemed content. He was in his element. A master of chopping meats, and solving crime in the streets.

Butcher: Man, I'm sure gonna miss Mei's pork dumplin's. What do you think, Chester? Was this moida? Or an *(Spanish pronunciation)* accidente?

OW VO: Chester, the Butcher's pet goat and crime-solving partner, trotted up to the body and gave it a good lick.

[hooves trotting]

Chester: *(big slurping licking sound)* Nahh.

Butcher: Oh Chesta, stop it! I didn't kill her with my winsome good looks, you flirt.

Chester: Nahhhh.

Butcher: I *did* get a haircut! I can't believe you noticed! It was just a little trim.

OW: Ahem, Butcher.

[tango ends, fade in Butchery ambience, the meat cooler humming vaguely]

Butcher: Oh, right, heh-heh, well, anyhow. Odd thing about Mei's body. The burn marks are consistent from the top of her noggin to the tippiest toe. I mean she coulda been standin' in the exact spot where the fire started, but this... this feels different. This almost looks like she... spontaneously combusted.

[Wailing Wharf Widow theme begins again]

OW: Curious... Earlier today... The Wild Man mentioned the Wailing Wharf-

[WWW theme cuts]

Butcher: NOPE!

[WWW theme resumes]

OW: I was merely going to mention the Wailing Wharf-

[WWW theme cuts]

Butcher: No need to say her name, okay? We all know what it is, I just don't believe in the supahnatural, okay?

OW: Then there's no harm in talking about her.

[a hesitant pause]

Butcher: Listen...

[WWW theme resumes]

Butcher: My ma used to tell me that story when I was a kid to scare me into being a good little Butcher. She would say "AY! GET YOUR TUSH TO BED BEFORE YOU GET SET ON FIRE BY THAT WEIRDO LADY!" Heh-heh, Classic Mama Butcher. So... *(clears throat)* y'know... you betta not say her name *(looks both ways)* just in case... Don't say her name... just in case...

OW VO: The Butcher excused himself abruptly.

[WWW theme cuts]

Butcher: Excuse me, abruptly.

[The Butcher's heavy-boot footsteps cross the room. a door shuts. muffled behind the door, The Butcher sings to comfort himself.]

Butcher (muffled): Old McButcher had a farm. Ee i ee i o. And on this farm he had a ghost – GHOST? NO, I meant GOAT! AHHH! CHESTER! CHESTERRRR!!! AH NO NO NOOO!!!

[hooves trotting across the room]

OW VO: Chester trotted after him, shaking his head at me.

Butcher (muffled, desperate): Singin' the song ain't workin' this time!! *(crying emphatically in fear)*

[the-mystery-grows-grimmer piano music]

OW VO: This obituary was proving more difficult than usual. Fen seemed highly suspect, but... there was something... unexplainable about this case – I mean obituary research. Could it really be that the Wild Man was right? I needed to find out more about the folktale of the Wailing Wharf Widow.

[the meat cooler clicks and groans open]

OW VO: Before heading out, I peeked inside the meat cooler.

[the meat cooler groans shut]

OW VO: Yep... Charlotte was still in there.

[small lapping waves in the distance. crowd chatter along the dock.]

OW VO: The wharf along Birdbiddle Lake has a single claim to fame: Crestfall's fish market, affectionately known as The Red Herring. There aren't any fish in Birdbiddle Lake, making The Red Herring somewhat misleading, but no one seems to mind. The market was alight with hubbub and hullabaloo. An attraction for every taste.

Shady Sea Captain: Come one! Come all!!!

OW VO: A Shady Sea Captain was trying his best to convince shoppers to join him on a cryptic lake-faring quest.

Shady Sea Captain: I may have lost me legs, I may have lost me crew! But I ain't gonna lose you! ...Anyone? Please? (*downcast*) Yarr...

[*step-right-up-to-the-seaside-carnival accordion music*]

OW VO: Ah yes! And who could forget Aster Kubo's Roadkill Roundup! I have fond memories as a child watching on in delight and horror as pancaked squirrels, raccoons, and possums pranced and somersaulted by Aster's expert puppeteering. Oooh, Hei the one-eyed wombat is performing Hamlet with his own skull this season. What a treat.

[*folksy electric guitar music fades in*]

OW VO: And of course, a staple of weekends here at the wharf: The Bally-Go-Backward Boys, who were, as they say, rocking and rolling.

[*band stops playing, crowd erupts in applause and cheers. when lead singer Eugene Portage speaks, his voice has the light reverb of a concert microphone.*]

Eugene: Thank you! Thank you! (*noticing OW walking by*) Well tickle me fancied, is that... why it is! THE Obituary Writer! What a couple's massage for sore eyes. I haven't seen this fella since we jammed at Samuel Plunk's funeral, may he rest in peace. Watch this – (*snapping tempo*) A one, two, three, four!

[*improvised groovy 1960s-style little rock ditty about the Obituary Writer*]

The Bally-Go-Backward Boys:

[Lyrics]

He writes about death

(Spooky, spooky death!)

He's not addicted to meth

(Not like my Uncle Seth)

And I must confess

(I gotta get it off my chest)

He knows how to dress!

(To the nines!)

Somebody grab a lighter

This man's on fire

He's not for hire

The Obituary Writer!

[*song ends. crowd bursts into delighted applause, laughing at the band's improv-ed cleverness.*]

Eugene (*eating up all the praise*): Oohoowee! Ain't that somethin'.

OW: WOW. I believe I am now the one... tickled fancied. Thank you, Eugene.

Eugene (*giggling*): The pleasure is all mine. What's hot off the press these days?

OW: Well, I'm working on Mei Lou's obituary.

Eugene: Oh... real shame. Y'know they've been very kind to us over the years. Offering food when the tides were low and even throwing fish in the lake when the tides were high to make it look like there was somethin' to catch in the first place. My heart goes out to Fen. And if there's anything we can do to help...

OW: I believe there is something... What can you tell me about... the Wailing Wharf Widow?

[*GASPS! throughout the crowd. everyone goes silent, then starts whisper-chatting conspiratorially to each other*]

Eugene (*turning grim*): Oh yes... I see... You know it's bad luck to talk about her around these parts. (*shifting tone to working the crowd again*) But, well, how could I resist indulging these fine folks with another little ditty!

[*crowd cheers!*]

OW: Oh, I was hoping you could just *tell* me—

[*creepy folk tale song, featuring a jazzy plucked bass and banjo*]

The Bally-Go-Backward Boys:

[Lyrics]

*There was a lady
About eight feet tall.
For most lovers
She couldn't care at all.*

*But there came a man
By the name of Blake.
He dreamt of sailin'
Out on the lake.*

*And the lady
Watched from the window,
For it's the story
Of the Wailin' Wharf Widow.*

*Oh the Wailin'
Wailin' Wharf
Wailin' Wharf Widow
Wailin' Wharf Widow...*

*There came a storm
When lightning struck.
[thunderclap!]
Our dear sailor's
Ship was sunk.*

*Oh how she wailed
In the dead of night,
Cursing the sky summoning
That lightning strike.*

*He'd gone sailin'
Now he was flailin'
And the woman
She was wailin'.*

*Oh the Wailin’
Wailin’ Wharf
Wailin’ Wharf Widow
Wailin’ Wharf Widow...*

*Oh the Wailin’
Wailin’ Wharf
Wailin’ Wharf Widow
Wailin’ Wharf Widow...*

[slowing down, hushed, cautionary]

Shhh!

[eerie guitar-y wail in the background]

*Yes, she still wails
In the dead of night,
Sets things afire
Like a lightning strike.*

*So be wary
What’s beneath your pillow...
She could be hunting you
That Wailing Wharf Widow...*

[song ends, crowd cheers]

Eugene: Thank you!

OW: Bravo! Another excellent tune.

Eugene: Thank you.

OW: So basically... the ghost of an eight foot tall woman goes around catching things on fire because she witnessed her lover being electrocuted on a tiny boat in the middle of the lake – The lake right behind me?

Eugene: Right on the nose!

OW: Huh... My first lover was a sailor.

[sweeping heartbreaking romantic orchestra, husband-leaving-for-war vibes. big waves crash on a shore.]

OW: That man told me he was going on a voyage.

Lover: I'm going on a voyage.

OW: And he'd come back for me one day...

Lover: But I'll come back for you one day. I love y—

[romantic music cuts]

OW: Anyway, thank you for your help!

Eugene: You have a killer-diller day now, ya hear?

[sounds of the wharf fade. things-are-getting-even-odder-and-creepier-with-this-case piano music begins, mysterious, growing sinister]

OW VO: I found myself walking away from The Bally-Go-Backward Boys more puzzled than before. Certainly it couldn't be that an old Crestfallen legend was responsible for Mei Lou's death. Yet no matter where I turned... The Wailing Wharf Widow was around every corner. Perhaps someone acting exceptionally suspicious might know. Someone like Mia Jasper, who at that moment was sneaking down the alleyway behind Lou's Chinese Cuisine, just as I had earlier that morning.

[sinister music fades]

OW VO: And now, the condolences.

[funky upbeat organ music]

OW VO: That Shady Sea Captain from the wharf sends his condolences. He says:

Shady Sea Captain: Ya-har! Do yee ever think to yee-self – “Pickles! I sure am bored with all this technology and distractin’ social media at me fingertips.” Well, now’s your chance to throw convenience out the window, and embark on an epic adventure with me! Together, we can uncover lost treasure, sail the seven seas, and along the way, maybe just like... hang out and... talk? Ya know? Yarrrr, gimme a ring! 208-994-4022. That’s 208-994-4022. I’d love to know yee’s favorite color.

[I dare you to call that number]

OW VO: How enticing, captain. Lou’s Chinese Cuisine also sends their condolences. They say: ...Oh, right... never mind... They say nothing. They burned down. Thank you one and all. Condolences mean everything and nothing.

[organ music ends. fade in nighttime ambience.]

OW VO: As day dimmed to dusk, Mia’s flashlight flickered inside the back office like a firefly on cocaine.

[window slides open]

OW: Are you lost?

OW VO: I said from the window. I love a good callback.

Mia: *(groaning)* Ugggghhhh. OW. Do you always have to appear at the most inconvenient times?

OW: Death is never convenient.

OW VO: I flopped into the office in a single, mostly-graceful leap.

[HUGE thud, objects falling and scattering everywhere. not graceful at all.]

Mia: What are you doing here?

OW: I could ask you the same thing.

Mia: Well... I’m... uh...

OW: You think Fen did it, don't you.

Mia: I just... look, I lost everything in that fire. My home. My bed. My collection of decapitated wrestling figures. I can't just move on without knowing what happened.

OW: If you're their lawyer, why are you sneaking around?

Mia: I don't wanna get caught.

OW: You could just say you're taking inventory of Mei's property.

Mia: But that's *not* what I'm doing—

OW: Or you're searching for paperwork on any outstanding debts...

Mia: I – uh...

OW: Or just say it's a part of the state-mandated probate process under Idaho statute—

Mia: I'm not a lawyer, okay!

OW: What?

Mia: I didn't pass the bar exam.

[*somber, thoughtful music, music fit for a moment of vulnerability – piano, cello*]

Mia: I wanted to figure out what happened, so, I dunno... I thought it'd be easier if I convinced Fen I could help. And... my family doesn't know I failed the exam. They all work so hard. And when my sister became a lawyer my parents were *thrilled*... I just thought... this would be a chance to be something good, y'know? I could pretend I was... what they wanted me to be. Pretend I was what *I* wanted to be. Well, what I thought I wanted to be.

OW: I'm sorry to hear that, Mia. I'm sure if you just told them—

Mia: They can *never* know. No one can know. Especially not Fen... We've known each other for a really long time and... I really like her, OW. But... I dunno, I'd kinda like to make sure I'm not crushing on a murderer? Although that sounds kinda awesome now that I say that out loud.

OW VO: I nodded. Sometimes it was easier to dream the world was a better place.

[grrraaaaawwwww – a creepy groan... a wraithlike WHOOSH! subtle “something’s coming” horror music, filled to the brim with uncertainty.]

OW VO: A noise came from outside the office.

Mia: Time to hide.

OW: Time to investigate.

Mia: Ugh! Why am I the only one on the same page as me?

[OW’s footsteps creeping across the room, the quiet creeeeaaak of a door]

OW VO: I emerged into the kitchen. Ever so slightly, a pair of double doors were swinging back and forth, directing my attention to the staff quarters. I crept forward.

[OW’s footsteps]

OW VO: Nothing could have prepared me for what was beyond those doors. Inside was...

[horror music builds to an enormous crescendo, climaxing to a reveal!]

OW VO: The most *hideous* art I have ever seen in my entire life.

[new uneasy music begins]

OW VO: Crude charcoal sketches littered the room. They were portraits of... Eugene Portage... The Shady Sea Captain... and other patrons of the wharf... barely recognizable. Each drawing was accented with a red background, as though engulfed in flames. And at the center, as though a shrine, was a portrait of Mei Lou.

[dramatic impact!]

Mia: Holy cannoli.

OW VO: Holy cannoli was right. Might these appalling pieces of art be Fen’s next victims?

[a *DIFFERENT* dramatic impact, but *JUST* as dramatic. fast-paced footsteps echo outside the room.]

OW VO: As though on cue, footsteps echoed through the kitchen.

[an additional dramatic impact, even *MORE* dramatic this time]

OW VO: In one swift motion, Mia combat rolled out a closed window.

Mia (oddly mild efforts considering she launched herself out a closed window, like it was nothing to her): Huhhh ah!

[glass shattering!]

Mia: Woo!

OW VO: I would have to take notes on her technique later. Before I could hide or turn myself into a perfect human sphere... a voice came from the doorway.

Fen: Most would consider it bad news to be visited by an obituary writer more than once.

[tense string music begins]

OW VO: Fen entered the staff quarters. Her hand was in her cardigan pocket, clutching a concealed object in a threatening manner. Was it a dagger? A blunt instrument? A letter opener prepared to be used with ill-intent? My nerves of steel wavered to nerves of aluminum foil wrapped around a warm baked potato. The baked potato of my confidence... was beginning to turn lukewarm. *Act casual, Obituary Writer, act casual.*

OW: Your art is... (condescending tongue click) unique?

Fen: I enjoy human subjects.

OW VO: *Subjects as in victims?* I thought. But I kept my lips sealed.

Fen: Something about the wrinkles around their lips when they smile. Their weather-worn faces. The way they seem to... *glow.*

OW VO: *Glow like when they catch fire?* I thought. But still I showed restraint. I eyed Fen's pocket with a wary glance.

Fen: My mother never understood. I had a dream that wasn't hers.

OW: Dream as in killing her?

Fen: Excuse me?

[tense music cuts]

OW VO: You have to understand, dear reader, that one just sort of slipped out.

Fen: You think I killed my mother?

[hair-raising confrontation music begins]

OW: I think you wanted out of the family business. You were at odds with your mother. So you killed her and burned the place down to run off with the insurance money.

OW VO: Fen looked as though they were on the brink of snapping. With a flick of their wrist, they removed something from their pocket. I flinched. It was...

[confrontation music builds and ends, shifting to calmer reveal music, breaking tension]

OW VO: ... a piece of charcoal?

Fen: The money isn't for running away. It's for staying here.

OW VO: Fen approached me... then leaned over my shoulder and made a quick adjustment to the painting of her mother.

[scratch scratch scratch of charcoal on canvas]

Fen: I wanted to make something for the people at the wharf. So I drew them. They've been so supportive of me over the years. My mother thought this was all a waste of time. We didn't always understand each other. I just didn't want to disappoint her.

OW VO: I was so caught up in the thrill of hunting for a fresh murderer, I had forgotten something incredibly important – I too knew what it was like to lose someone.

OW: So if you didn't murder Mei, then who did?

Fen: I don't know.

OW: What started the fire?

Fen: I don't know.

OW: Fen... who is that in the painting?

Fen: My mother.

OW: No, behind her.

[music shifts to a drone more ominous...]

Fen: Oh, uh... that's-that's my grandmother. She was gone before I was even born. My mom said she went a little bonkers and disappeared.

OW: How tall was your grandmother?

Fen: Tall... like *really* tall... eight foot something. Sometimes I feel like I still see her... at night... watching over me...

[click, bzzzt, a lightbulb sparking off]

OW VO: The lights fizzled off. The room was lit only by the glimmer of lanterns flickering down on the wharf.

[violins build to a ghastly quiver. grrawwww – the groan again, and the wraithlike WHOOSH!]

OW VO: A long crouched shadow emerged from the floor, then vanished.

[a dark pulse as the shadow manifests]

The Wailing Wharf Widow?? (*voice layered with a spirit-like effect*): AHAHAHA! (*a grandiose cackle, like a mad scientist*) Hello...

Fen: Grandmother?

[*music shifts to gentle ethereal ambience*]

Fen: I-I- thought you were dead!

Grandma Lou: (*giggly, slightly off her rocker*): Oohooohoo, I AM dead! I have been in the walls.

Fen: I... I don't understand.

Grandma Lou: I passed away many, many years ago. Ahh.. but I didn't want to miss my daughter and grandchild growing up.

OW: Are you... the Wailing Wharf Widow?

Grandma Lou: Āiyā, rumors and tall tales. People just clumsy. No... I just like to be here, with my family... in the walls.

Fen: You were here? What happened to my mother?

Grandma Lou: (*sighs*) You two always fought so much. Never seeing eye to eye. So much yelling! Mei never understood you. But I saw her try. She'd stare so long at your drawings. And the night she died, she was making your favorite jiāozi – Sweet pork dumplings.

Fen: Oh... we argued that night. She said all I did was disappoint her.

Grandma Lou: She wanted to apologize, in her own way. But when she lit the stove, a gas pipe burst, and... Everything went up in flames.

OW: So Mei wasn't murdered... It was an accident.

Grandma Lou: Who knows why these things happen? Life is a mystery... even after death. I wish I could have stopped it. (*sigh*) I suppose it was her time.

Fen (*getting emotional*): But... I don't want it to be her time... You're here, aren't you? You stayed. Why isn't my mom here?

Grandma Lou: I don't know...

Fen (*starting to tear up*): Why did she...

Grandma Lou (*gentle*): I don't know.

Fen: (*breaks down and starts to cry*)

Grandma Lou: Hey hey hey hey... You are so strong. And look at all your beautiful art. You will be okay, Fen-Fen. And your phantom nǎi nai will be around more often from now on. I promise.

Fen: That's... creepy, but reassuring? Thank you, nǎi nai.

[*meaningful pause... that's completely broken by a klaxon car horn and a car speeding up to the restaurant*]

Grandma Lou: Oh! Just... not tonight...

[*arousing jazz with guitar, piano, bass, and musical whistles begins*]

Grandma Lou: I have a date with a Wild Man in the Dark Woods.

[*car door opens*]

Wild Man: Yoohoo!

Grandma Lou: Oooh... (*already getting revved up, like "Get over here you hairy hunk"*)

Wild Man: I'm ready to bounce, my ethereal dumpling!

Grandma Lou: (*a pining, dotting sigh, giggling*) So handsome. So hairy. Heh heh heh... B-R-B! Ho!

[*wraith whoosh as Grandma Lou glides away on her hot date*]

OW VO: And with that, the Wild Man jumped into the air–

[a cartoon boing! as The Wild Man jumps]

Wild Man: AHA!

OW VO: –and curled into a perfect sphere.

[a suction cup sound as he zoops into a perfect sphere. whistling as he streams down into Grandma Lou's hand.]

OW VO: Grandma Lou caught him with one hand and bounced him like a basketball down the wharf at rapid speeds toward the Dark Woods.

[literal basketball SFX as Grandma Lou dribbles him down the wharf]

Grandma Lou: *(cackling with true madness)*

Wild Man *(grunting with every bounce):* I am... having... fun... erm! Ow! Erch!

[arousing jazz fades]

OW VO: Just as they disappeared from sight, Mia Jasper clambered in through the window.

[a thwap and thud as Mia topples inside, landing on the shattered glass she left behind]

Mia: Sorry about that. What'd I miss?

OW *(in awe):* We met the Wailing Wharf Widow.

Mia *(scoffing):* Yeah right.

OW VO: I shrugged. What else could be said of an eight-foot-tall tale and her spherical wild lover?

Mia: You okay, Fen?

OW VO: Fen didn't reply. They were fixated on the charcoal drawing of their mother.

Mia: Let's go for a walk.

[slowly fade in gentle waves. crickets. the world is still and quiet on the dock.]

Mia: It's hard. Losing someone. Especially when you don't expect it.

Fen: Yeah. I wasn't ready.

Mia: I don't think we're ever ready.

Fen: It's just scary knowing it could happen to anyone, at any time. Part of me felt like my mom was just going to be around forever. And then suddenly she wasn't. What am I supposed to do with that?

Mia: Honestly, I do think it's a load of crap when people say it gets easier. It doesn't. But... I guess it can get bearable? When you have people who care about you. You have these weirdos on the wharf. And you got me. Okay?

Fen: Okay.

[soft, emotional music begins]

Fen: I think I'm gonna restore the restaurant. It's what my mom would have wanted. But I'm also gonna do my own thing. I think she would have wanted that too, eventually. Lou's Chinese Cuisine and Post-Modern Art Gallery. A little bit of me, a little bit of her. That's what it'll be.

Mia: I think that sounds awesome, Fen... Listen, um, I have to tell you something. I just don't think I can lie to you anymore.

Fen: You're not a lawyer.

Mia: How did you—

Fen: You're a really bad liar. And I heard you and OW talking through the walls. You guys are *not* subtle.

Mia: OH. You heard that? How much did you—

Fen: If you blush any more your face is gonna explode. *(chuckles)* It's okay, Mia. I... like you too. And you aren't crushing on a murderer, I promise. Just... be patient with me, okay?

Mia: Totally, yeah. *(awkward, a little sing-songy)* *Patience is a thing I can dooooo.*

Fen: You gotta calm down, girl.

Mia *(only Mia is allowed to swear in this show):* Oh shit. Sorry.

[wharf ambience fades out]

OW VO: A few days later, The Slapper would be called in to confirm Mei Lou's death, but the second her hand struck Mei's face—

[SLAP! PSSSSHHHH, The Slapper's hand whips down, and Mei's body caves in and withers away like loose sand in a breeze.]

OW VO: She collapsed into a pile of ash, so that pretty much cleared that up. But Mei would always remain intact in Fen's mind. We care so much about the opinions of the dead. Though they are no longer with us, their voices live on in our heads. But the thing is – it isn't really their voice. It's our own, masked behind the facade of our loved ones, motivated by our insecurities. You should remember them and honor them, but you should also live your life, with good intentions, and try your best not to cause any disasters.

[keys jingle, OW's apartment door squeaks open and clatters shut]

OW VO: And yet, as I returned to my apartment that night, greeted by my flesh-craving feline companions—

[all three cats meow in unison, a chorus of Hellos!]

OW VO: I realized I was guilty of the exact same thing... What would Charlotte think of me? Of what I've done? Of what I've become? Desperately searching for what I have lost, just like she did. Searching out of a lack of answers. She disappeared, ran away... I don't know why. Fen's words echoed in my mind...

Fen's Words Echoing: *I don't want it to be her time. You're here, aren't you? You stayed. Why isn't my mom here?*

OW VO: Why isn't Charlotte here? Why didn't she stay?

[Charlotte's gentle heartbeat]

OW VO: Her heart beat gently like a tiny drum. My heart beat, in rhythm. This has been the obituary of Mei Lou.

[soft, emotional music fades]

[mournful, musing piano music - warped as though on an old record]

Evening Post: This has been Death by Dying. Created by Evan Gulock and Niko Gerentes. Featuring the voices of Evan Gulock as The Obituary Writer, Erika Ishii as Fen Lou, Iridian Fierro as Mia Jasper, Niko Gerentes as The Wild Man, The Butcher, Chester the Goat, The Shady Sea Captain, and OW's First Lover, Noah Baldwin as Eugene Portage, and Su Ling Chan as Grandma Lou. Additional Voices Provided by The DePaul BFA 4 Class of 2023. Sensitivity Reader: Kienna Shaw. Music composed by Niko Gerentes, Steven O'Brien, Migfus20, ErikMMusic, and Tyops. "The Obituary Writer's Ditty" was arranged by Niko Gerentes and sung by Noah Baldwin and Niko Gerentes, with lyrics by Evan Gulock & Niko Gerentes. "The Wailing Wharf Widow" was arranged and sung by Noah Baldwin, with lyrics by Evan Gulock & Niko Gerentes. Portions of this episode were recorded at The Foxhole Chicago by studio engineer Dave Langley. A very Special Thanks to our Featured Patrons, Aster Kubo and Hei, and our Indiegogo Associate Producers: Luis Resto, Samariel Koster, Robert Gulock, Jordan Percle, and Angel Acevedo. And lest we forget, our eternal gratitude to Matthew Cunningham and George Zarr. If any of you ethereal dumplings would like to send their condolences, comments, hopes, fears, or dreams, you can contact The Obituary Writer personally at TheObituaryWriter@gmail.com, or follow us on social media [@DeathByDyingPod](https://www.instagram.com/DeathByDyingPod). If you like what you hear, consider becoming a supporter of the show on Patreon and get access to bonus content, bloopers, messages from The Button-Eyed Raven, and more. Visit patreon.com/deathbydyingpod, or follow the link in the description. And remember... This podcast does not condone turning into a perfect human sphere for sport or leisure. With that said, a regulation basketball is 29 and a half inches in circumference and inflated to around 7 and a half to 8 and a half pounds per square inch. Please measure twice and inflate yourself once before attempting to bounce with the ethereal elderly.

[warping piano music spins out]