

Fashioning Fatality

By Shannon Sullivan

Just outside a decrepit mansion that sits on the edge of town, two young journalists were beginning to film the story of lifetime. They had just broken the chains that held together the feeble fence and were now standing next to the abandoned mansion of grand proportion. A few chimney stacks could be seen poking their heads up above the tree line. The balconies loomed overhead; they clinged to the walls for dear life. Those walls, which appeared to stretch for miles, were lined with an infinite matrix of white bricks. The arched windows were the only thing that stopped the pattern from going on forever. Charlotte, the face of the investigational team, had positioned herself in the middle of the two oak doors that guarded the old home. With her partner Olivia on camera duty, she began to speak.

“This is Charlotte Smith reporting from the infamous Howell Home. This was the home of Mister James Howell and his wife Missus Anne Howell. A real Gatsby type of their time, the Howell’s were known for their lavish parties at their beautiful mansion. And as many of us ‘mysterfreaks’ already know, one of these parties had cost Missus Anne Howell her life. As I stand in front of this decaying home, the mystery of her death is as alive as ever.”

After finishing her introduction, Charlotte turned to the front door. Usually on their investigations they would enter the premises through a broken window. But surprisingly, all had remained intact. And though she knew it was unlikely, Charlotte had a strange feeling that the door might be open. She took a deep breath, grabbed the handle, and pushed hard. This was unnecessary as the door opened with remarkable ease. And so, the two girls stepped into the home.

Besides the little twilight that had leaked in through the windows and the dim light of the camcorder, the room was pitch black. That was until a beam of light cut across the room. Olivia had turned on her flash and had its intensity centered on Charlotte. Covering her blinded eyes for a moment, Charlotte readied herself for her next lines.

“Exactly 60 years ago today, April 28th, the Howell’s were hosting one of their weekly bashes. It was a lively Saturday night and not unusual for the couple, over one hundred guests were present. Drugs and alcohol were also present that night, despite *both* being illegal at the time. As the rowdy party drew to a close, Mr. James Howell was met with a horrific scene. Lying on the floor of their master bedroom was the lifeless body of his wife, surrounded by a pool of blood,” Charlotte explained.

She then pulled a flashlight from her pocket. She flicked it on, turned around, and proceeded to walk further into the home. Olivia followed close behind. Each step they took was accompanied by a squeaky floor board that was only amplified by the echoes of the empty room. As they looked around, they were surprised by the lack of graffiti on the walls. It was almost as if the house had died with Anne that day; forever stuck in time. They trekked further into the darkness and soon a grand staircase had revealed itself to them. The girls grabbed the dull golden rail and began to climb. Charlotte went slow, beginning to narrate again, while she made quick glances back at the camera behind her.

“The cause of death? Blunt force trauma to the back of the head. Though, no murder weapon was ever identified. And according to the initial police reports, none of the guests had witnessed anything unusual that night either. However, many were too intoxicated to be considered reliable witnesses anyway. So, with no witnesses, little evidence, and hundreds of possible suspects, what the police really had to search for was a motive. And they found one.”

Charlotte paused. “According to Lucille Vander, a close friend of Anne’s, Mister and Missus Howell had been arguing recently. These arguments had stemmed from, as she put it, ‘Anne’s inability to satisfy her husband as she seemingly could not birth children’. Did these issues drive Mr. Howell to murder? This was the police’s leading, and only, theory. But they had nothing to implicate James, or anyone for that matter, and so the case remained unsolved. As it does to this day.”

The girls had unknowingly skipped the second floor, leading them straight to the top of the home. While they had no idea where they were going, they felt a strong urge to go down the right hallway. Identical door after identical door passed them on both sides as they continued through the liminal space. The girls had wordlessly decided to investigate the last room at the end of the hall. Charlotte instinctively grabbed and twisted the knob. The door creaked open and they slipped inside.

The room was sparse, only a few large pieces of furniture covered in cloth were illuminated by the beams of light that they had intercepted. But in the space around them, the beams seemed to fade into an endless void. Olivia pointed her flash at the floor, tracing their future footsteps. The scratches in the floorboards were almost hidden by the thick blanket of dust that laid over them. As they reached the center of the room, a glint caught Olivia’s eye. She tilted the camcorder upwards to get a better look. Lying in the middle of the deteriorating floor was a short, turquoise dress adorned with thousands of dangling jewels and beads. As Olivia’s light reflected off the ornate fabric, Charlotte bent over and gently picked it up. She carefully inspected the garment as she slowly ran the beads through her fingers. “There’s no way that’s real, right?” asked Olivia. Charlotte did not respond as she continued to examine the dress. She looked for the tags that would normally be attached to the back of the neckline. Instead of seeing

the marks of modern corporate manufacturing, she was greeted by two initials carefully sewn in, seemingly by hand: AH.

Without a word, Charlotte walked briskly to the master bath, dress in hand, and closed the door behind her. Olivia followed, confused by Charlotte's strange behavior, and banged on the door with her fist. After repeated attempts and no response, Olivia turned around and looked to the floor once more. In the center of the room, where the turquoise dress once laid, a different dress resided. This one was red, covered by a veil of black beads, and it was slightly larger than the last.

Olivia froze, paralyzed by a feeling of pure dread. She stopped filming and started to reverse through the recent footage. And just as she had thought, there was nothing under that turquoise dress. Olivia pressed the record button once again and placed the camcorder on one of the only pieces of furniture in the room. With a deep breath, Olivia hesitantly approached the garment. She kneeled beside it and picked it up softly. The dread she once felt had suddenly drained from her body. Up close, she was entranced by the black and red beauty.

Charlotte stepped out of the bathroom, now wearing the dress. The fabric hugged her every curve while the beads draped elegantly off them. She noticed that she was not the only one that had changed. Olivia was now wearing the dress she had found, its shape and patterns accentuated her statuesque figure, while its color complemented her skin. Charlotte had also noticed that the room was brighter than she had remembered. She scanned the room and noticed the light that bled underneath the door; it was coming from the hallway. Just then, Olivia began to hear music quietly emanating outside that same door. The two girls then made their way towards it in sync.

Charlotte slowly opened the door. It did not creak as it did before. The scene that greeted them was also not as they had remembered. The sconces on the walls now illuminated the hallway with a faint golden glow. The once dust ridden floor was now so glossy that you could almost see your reflection in it. And a lively jazz tune drifted down along the hall. As the girls stared with bewilderment, they had not noticed the figure that had approached them.

“Anne! Lucille! Where have you been? Mr. Howell has been looking for you two for ages,” said the woman. Her voice broke their bewildered stares and replaced them with looks of pure confusion. The girls now studied the woman before them. She was a petite lady in a long silky dress. She had a feather boa of the same color draped around her elbows. Her skin was pale, framed by her short black hair which was held together by a large beaded headband. As the girls became more confused, so did the woman before them. “Is something wrong?” she asked. “Please excuse us for a moment,” Charlotte tried to calmly reply. She then grabbed Olivia’s arm, pulling her back slightly. After doing so, she swiftly closed the door.

“What the fuck is going on? You’re seeing this, right?” Olivia asked.

“And hearing it. That lady thought we were Anne and Lucille!” Charlotte replied.

“Buildings don’t just magically repair themselves! And where did that lady come from? Is any of this even real?” Olivia rambled.

“I don’t know. But if it is, we have the opportunity of a lifetime,”

“What are you talking about?”

“We can solve the case Liv! And we’ll finally be taken seriously! No more shitty stories about decades old cold cases,”

The idea sounded tempting. Olivia cracked open the door slightly and took a peek outside. She could see the silhouettes of people down the hall and hear the clicking of the

women's heels. The faint smell of cigarettes seeped into the room. She closed the door once again and turned back to Charlotte.

"So what do you want to do?" she asked.

"Well, I'm thinking that *I'm* Anne and *you're* Lucielle. With that, it's probably best if you focus on Mr.Howell and I'll try to talk to everyone else," Charlotte insisted.

"Do you really think this is a good idea?"

"I don't see you coming up with anything better"

"Fine. But we meet back up in this room in an hour."

"Deal."

The girls mustered all the sanity and stamina they could and proceeded to walk out the door. The woman that was once there had now disappeared into the myriad of guests down the hall. The two girls shared a subtle nod and a sly smile and went their separate ways.

Charlotte had approached the large group at the end of the hall. She was quiet at first. She tried to think of questions while she simultaneously tried to learn the vernacular of those around her. But as she exchanged greetings with the guests, she started to exchange laughs as well. Her stage presence had become exaggerated. Her silky hair bounced off of her glowing skin, her giggle carried from room to room; the guests were mesmerized. Soon, she was offered a cocktail and a cigarette. And while she was no smoker, something within her just couldn't resist.

Meanwhile, Olivia was trying to track down Mr.Howell. She walked aimlessly around the gigantic mansion until she stumbled upon the library. The main wall was lined with books from side to side, floor to ceiling. The other walls were covered by an expensive looking wood. An intricately carved grandfather clock towered in the corner. In the center of the room was a large

leather chair, it's back facing the door. She could tell that someone was sitting in it as she noticed faint waves of smoke rising from it. She slowly stepped towards it, her heart racing. When she had reached the other side of the chair, she couldn't believe her eyes. There he was, Mister James Howell, with a book in one hand and a cigarette in the other. The only picture she had ever seen of him was a grainy black and white photo that she had torn from an old newspaper. The photo did not do him justice. He was a slender, yet tall man. His face was framed by his slicked back hair and chiseled cheekbones. As Oliva studied the man, he had just noticed her presence and looked up from his book. Their eyes met and Olivia found out that his eyes were a sparkling jade green. The brief eye contact sent a flutter through her stomach.

"Lucille! What a pleasure to see you," exclaimed James.

"The pleasure is all mine!" Olivia replied.

"Are you here alone tonight?" he asked.

"Indeed,"

"I'm sure there's some fine fellow simply waiting to have a chance at your hand,"

"I have someone in mind,"

"Then please do bring them sometime! Our home is your home, Lucielle,"

They were interrupted by the chime of the grandfather clock. Olivia knew this meant that she had to return to Charlotte but she was compelled to stay with Mr. Howell. He seemed like such a gentle man, she could hardly believe that this was someone capable of murder.

"Well, I must get going now. I'm sure the others are curious about my whereabouts," James said.

"I'm sure they are," she added.

"Oh, and Lucielle,"

“Yes?”

“If you happen to see my wife, please let her know that I would like to see her,”

And with that, he was gone. His last line had sent a sharp pain through Olivia’s gut but she was unsure as to why. She then made her way back to the main hall. As she descended, she glanced at the paintings on the wall. Beautiful landscapes and portraits decorated the canvases, each encased in gold frames. She wondered if the Howell’s were deserving of such nice things. She wondered if Anne was deserving of such a wonderful life. As her thoughts raced, she had finally reached the end of the hall.

Olivia slipped back into the darkness of the initial bedroom. Charlotte had returned to the room only slightly earlier and had been unaware of Olivia’s arrival. She was studying a photo that she held in her hands. Olivia peeked over Charlotte’s shoulder to see the picture for herself; it was a photograph of Anne and James on their wedding day. The sight of the happy couple suddenly and deeply angered her. Olivia picked up the camcorder that she left in the room earlier. Charlotte noticed the shifting light on the wall and began to turn around. But she did not turn fast enough. Olivia, using all of her strength, had struck Charlotte in the back of the head with the camcorder.

The impact had caused chunks of plastic and small bits of metal to scatter around the room. Charlotte’s legs gave out and her head smacked onto the floor with a loud thump. On the floor, she struggled to breathe. The sound of her soft gasps were overpowered by Olivia’s wild panting. As Charlotte laid unconscious, her dress began to change. Olivia watched as the dress transformed before her eyes. What was once turquoise was now a muddy brown. All of the beads had fallen off, exposing the ‘threads’ that held them. Those threads were coarse and matted; they were made from human hair. As Olivia remained fixated on Charlotte’s dress, her own dress had

grown damp. She looked down and saw that it had darkened in color. That's when her nose was assaulted with a pungent metallic smell. And that's when she realized her dress was soaked in blood.

She rushed to the door and swung it open. The speed of the door had caused a whirlwind of dust to fly into Olivia's face. In the hallway, the lights had gone out again. The house was eerily silent; no footsteps, no music, no distant chatter. All she could hear was her own staggered breathing and the pounding of her heart. She realized that she could no longer hear Charlotte and turned back to her friend. A pool of blood had formed around her head and she had now grown still. As the crushing reality of the situation settled, Olivia began to scream.