It was Sunday night. Johnny wouldn’t sleep. He never did, not with the racket going on outside. It was so loud he couldn’t even hear the rat scuttling across his bedroom floor.

It bothered him; the absence of that sound. The tiny scratching of his four legged friend had become something of a comfort. He had named him Jack, after Ripper. He feared the real Jack less now.

Monday was market day at Smithfield and on Sunday nights, beneath stars that despised them, men drove cattle through the narrow, winding streets in readiness for the morning. They beat, yelled and cursed, while the beasts responded with brays and bellows of their own. Johnny always thought it must keep half of London awake, but he had discovered it was just for the poor, unlucky enough to live in this district, that the din carried, as if the noise itself was more respectful of the rich.

The cattle were passing his house in single file as that’s all that could fit between the dilapidated buildings. In the morning, he knew, the streets, already stained with filth, would be covered in mire. As soon as he stepped outside the stench would rise from it and attack his nostrils like noxious pipe smoke. But he would battle through it, as he would battle through the thick fog that hung heavy over the houses each Monday, as if nature was ashamed of what had taken place there and wanted to keep it hidden. When he arrived at school he would be scolded for the muck visible on his shoes and trousers.

He lay on his back, staring at the underside of the roof. His room was in the attic. He hadn’t asked, he’d just moved his things from the floor below. His mum hadn’t said anything when she’d realised, just mouthed a silent ‘oh’. She understood.

There were tiny holes in the roof that let the wind in, whistling or roaring, depending on its strength. Rain trickled through, too. He couldn’t hear the wind today. But he could feel it. He pulled his blanket up to his shoulders. It was frayed and thinning in places, it did nothing for warmth. He rolled onto his side.

Moonlight shone through the window and onto the floor; he had no curtains. He used to watch, his eyes wide with shock, the cruelty inflicted on the cattle, but he didn’t see the point anymore. His memories supplied the images well enough.

The drovers had sticks; thick, blunt instruments, and blows rained down on the beasts, unnecessarily, because the bovine train was full and they could progress no quicker anyway. The men would strike them behind their ankles, across the back of their necks, over their heads, all the while swearing and kicking. The men were so dirty, unshaven and hunched that Johnny thought of them as mire made human, filth given form.

Under the glow of the moon, which shone on their silky hides and revealed the powerful musculature beneath, it was the beasts that were majestic. Yet it was them who were beaten down on the way to their slaughter.

He had noticed men, neighbours who he knew hit their wives for they wore it as a badge of pride, leaning on their door frames and smoking. They watched the procession coldly. Occasionally a look of disgust flitted across their faces, their masks dropping for a second. Johnny wasn’t sure if the disgust was for the drovers or the animals.
He shut his eyes, trying to force the image that had risen unwanted, of a man at his own front door, mirroring the stance and attitude of the others, from his mind. He let the memory of his mother, holding ice to her cheek, and telling him in a quavering voice that she had ‘been clumsy again’, dissipate.

The noises of the cattle had reached a violent pitch. Unbelievably, the shouts of the drovers could still be heard above it, as could the frequent thudding of their sticks.

The walls of his room shuddered suddenly and drops of water that had seeped through the roof and clung to the rafters let go, tumbling like frantic rainfall before his eyes. A great beast had fallen. He knew, because the rain always fell with them.

He put his hands over his ears. He did not want to hear the aggression required to urge the animal back to its feet. He felt sharpness at the back of his throat, knew tears were threatening and squeezed his eyes shut, wishing to hide in darkness with no sight or sound.

He did not know how long he lay there, he only knew he could not drown out the noise of the chaos outside, nor could he prevent images of violence appearing like paintings on the back of his eyelids. Johnny breathed deeply, opened his eyes and ears.

Jack was scratching at a rough patch of wood on the floor. He looked over, his glossy black eyes seeming to find Johnny’s shadow in the bed. He paused, just for a second, then resumed scratching.

Johnny smiled. At least he had Jack. On the nights when it was quieter outside, it was the noise of the rat on which he concentrated. The move up an extra floor did not muffle it as much as he had hoped: his dad’s shouting, his mum’s screaming, her begging. But if he really focussed on the scratches and the chewing, absorbed himself in what Jack was doing, he could almost pretend it wasn’t happening.

The room shuddered again. The men’s shouts rose. More rain fell. The rain always fell.

§

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