

A SKETCH IN SCARLET

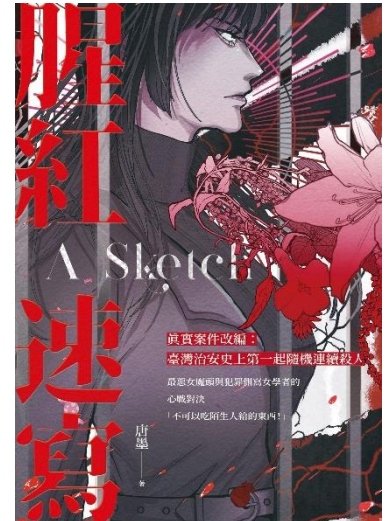
腥紅速寫

A child killer awaits the outcome of her insanity defense from prison. Outside, a criminal psychologist catches a shocking tell in a news reel: as the killer lowers her head to avoid questions from reporters, a self-satisfied smirk momentarily appears on her lips...

A series of child murders upends life in a southern fishing village in 1980s Taiwan. The female killer sits in prison as her insanity defense plays out, but a death sentence seems inevitable. With time running out, criminal psychologist Wang Yueh-hsueh visits death row to interview the killer and collect a first-hand account for her research.

From the court records, Yueh-hsueh knows the killer used her status as a “friendly neighbor” to ingratiate herself with local children before giving them poisoned candy. The records also show that she looked on, expressionless, as the children were rushed off to the hospital. Yueh-hsueh uncovers further facts about the killer: she became infertile after an illness, and when she was a teenager, her mother forced her to marry a man twenty years her senior. What was the truth, then? Was she a meticulous and calculating serial killer, or a woman who had lost her mind after suffering too much trauma? In their meetings, Yueh-hsueh tries every means of gaining her research subject’s trust, all to no avail. Finally, when she mentions her mother, the killer points to an empty corner and says, “You can see her, too, can’t you!” What unfolds from there will leave Yueh-hsueh questioning her own sanity as much as the killer’s.

Based on true events, author Karasumi conducted extensive archival and field research before adapting the notorious case of Taiwan’s first female serial killer into a crime/suspense novel, incorporating both details of the investigation and real-life controversies surrounding capital punishment. If not via the death sentence, how can a society discourage the most heinous crimes? If the legal system isn’t the solution, how do we address the social problems that lead to criminal behavior? More than just a crime thriller adapted from true events, *A*



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Sketch in Scarlet addresses social issues that will keep readers thinking long after the book is returned to the shelf.

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A SKETCH IN SCARLET

By Karasumi

Translated by Jim Weldon

“Professor, Professor! Daydreaming, are you? Or thinking up some more of your bullshit to try and trick me?”

“I’m giving hard thought to the question you asked, because I want to give you a proper answer.” Yueh-hsueh knew she was overthinking things; it simply wasn’t possible that Chen-Lin Shu-fen knew about all that stuff from her past that even Ching-fang wasn’t necessarily aware of. Yueh-hsueh had pickled all those wounds thoroughly by now, with great fistfuls of rough salt and fine sugar, with her career and achievements, with life’s little compromises and small loves and joys. Even if she were compelled to recall that past, by now it had become rinsed out entirely in the passing of the years, ripening to a savor that mixed both salt and sweet, sufficiently palatable that you would not choke over how hard life was, which is always the case anyway. A past that only became more flavorsome the more you chewed it over was never going to retraumatize her spirit a second time around.

“What question?” It was hard to work out if Chen-Lin Shu-fen was putting on an act with this deranged behavior, but whatever the case, the way her thoughts appeared to leap about seemed sufficient to prove her mental state was something other than normal.

“You asked if I missed home.”

“What, missing home? Oh, have you got no home? That doesn’t matter, come on, you’re welcome, very welcome, to come to my home, treat it like your own.” Chen-Lin Shu-fen laughed and raised both hands, using one to point at Warden Liu, “Seen them two, have you? One’s my driver and the other’s my butler. So, treat it like your own home, no standing on ceremony.”

“What about you, have you got used to living here?”

“It’s a two-story house looks out on the harbor, see, you get a sea breeze blowing every day; look what it’s done to my hair.” Chen-Lin Shu-fen ran her fingers through her ponytail. “It’s turned so grey; have I gotten old?”

“I know, I’ve been to see it.”

“Why didn’t you stop a while then; have a cup of tea before you left?”

“I did, though; it so happened you weren’t home, but your mother did make me a cup of tea.”

“Oh, that’s all right then. Oh yes, I remember now, I’d gone to collect the kid from school.”

“Your son?”

“Hah, don’t talk utter shite!” At the sound of the word “son”, Chen-Lin Shu-fen burst into crazed laughter, wagging an accusatory finger in Yueh-hsueh’s face. “Talking shite! I was collecting

Huang Jung-wang's girl, wasn't I? He asked me to go and pick up his daughter for him; look, see, she's squatting just over there."

Just as Yueh-hsueh was thinking they'd have to terminate the interview because Chen-Lin was becoming deranged again, she had unexpectedly brought the conversation back round to something directly relevant to the case. Yueh-hsueh gave a quick glance back at the prison officer behind her to the right, to confirm that the recorder was running. Only after Warden Liu had given a nod to indicate that she could proceed did Yueh-hsueh push the microphone a little closer to Chen-Lin Shu-fen. Yueh-hsueh dared not look back to her left; if she really did see the little Huang girl squatting there, it would be her turn to lose her mind.

All of them there in the visiting suite were acutely aware that any part of the conversation to follow might well reveal Chen-Lin Shu-fen's motive.

"So, you went to pick up his daughter; when exactly was this?"

"Yesterday morning, wasn't it? He asked me to go and meet his daughter and bring her to the market." Chen-Lin Shu-fen had suddenly become, to all appearances, entirely normal; answering the questions just like any ordinary person, the only difference being her confusion about time, describing something that had occurred almost six months ago as having happened the previous morning.

"Then after that?"

"Then after that I bought some hairtail off Huang Jung-wang; he gave me an extra piece too, pretty decent of him, eh?"

"Do you often buy fish from Huang Jung-wang?"

"We live by the sea, so of course we eat a lot of fish. I buy big fish heads off him too, and stew them at home; grass carp, size of those heads, well, a whole one's probably about the same weight as a five-year-old child." As if she was saying it deliberately to make Yueh-hsueh and Warden Liu uncomfortable, Chen-Lin Shu-fen laughed and continued, "Do you know how heavy a five-year-old child is? Very, very heavy."

Having never held a child in her arms, Yueh-hsueh was at a loss to answer, but she was also considering whether Chen-Lin had asked deliberately to put them off the scent somehow. Answering quite normally one minute, then incomprehensible babble the next, it meant you couldn't tell at all what she was thinking. One of the thresholds for determining the mental state of a serial killer, besides the rape or sexual abuse of the corpse, was necrophagic compulsions, but Chen-Lin had not defiled her victims in this way. Going on the evidence available to date, she had most likely not even touched their bodies, nor had she kept any clothing or body parts as trophies. She was a killer who just liked to watch her victims die; she wasn't even mentally unbalanced.

But what if she had done something? Were all the children's bodies intact? Had she in fact cut something from one of the bodies that had not yet been given an autopsy?

Before Chen-Lin caught on that her mind was racing wildly, Yueh-hsueh quickly made a show of answering the previous question, "I don't. I've never picked up a child."

“Very heavy, oh yes; every time I have to carry a fish head home it makes my arms ache, but the fish head stew I make is something else, oh yes. You can try some next time you come by, see for yourself if it’s true.”

Why did Chen-Lin keep talking about fish heads? That dish of stewed fish head they’d had the night before last must have weighed a good thirty catties at least, sliced along its length without completely severing it in two, then pressed flat but still whole, boiled in vinegar until the bones went soft, then served as a well-stewed fish chowder. Yueh-hsueh recalled that she hadn’t picked out any fish meat with her chopsticks and Hsieh Wen-che had noticed. He kept encouraging her to try, and had ended up picking out a piece of meat from by the mouth and putting it in her bowl. Yueh-hsueh had swallowed it down as best she could. Hsieh Wen-che had handed her the prisoner visitation permit as they left the Japanese restaurant that evening. She had contacted Warden Liu the following day, and come here to Nanhai Prison with Ching-fang shortly after that.

Was it all just a simple coincidence? Or had Hsieh Wen-che let something slip about their dinner when he came to interview Chen-Lin Shu-fen?

Yueh-hsueh saw a child, not breathing, half suspended upside-down in a ball pit, with Chen-Lin Shu-fen holding one foot; the fish knife flashing in her other hand, slicing the child clean in half, then cutting the body into parts that she set out on one of the white tile stalls at the fish market, adding a price tag written in colored pencil for good measure. Chen-Lin, wearing a white apron and still gripping the knife, looked jubilantly at Yueh-hsueh as she cried out, “Fish heads for sale! Special price just for you!”

She stabbed the knife into the fish head, its thick lips still opening and closing, but from them came the plaintive wailing of a child, “It’s burning! My throat’s burning! Auntie, my throat is burning!”

In a bid to stop her mind running on like this, Yueh-hsueh took a deep breath. Doing her best to conceal her wild imaginings, she followed up on the topic of Huang Jung-wang, “So did you ever cook fish heads for his daughter?”

“You’d have to ask mother about that.” Chen-Lin Shu-fen looked behind herself as she spoke, staring at the blank wall. “Where’s mother? Strange, she was here just now. Where’s mother?”

Yueh-hsueh planned to stay detached while Chen-Lin played out her little drama, but the next moment Chen-Lin turned sharply round and slapped both hands down on the table. She stared directly into Yueh-hsueh’s eyes and rose until half her body reached right across the table. The listlessness she had just displayed must have been an act. She spat out her next words one by one through tightly clenched teeth, “Mother... is... right... here!”

Yueh-hsueh told herself she must not fall for this sort of cheap playacting, and she certainly wasn’t going to lose such an excellent opportunity by allowing herself to get rattled, so she focused her attention on Chen-Lin’s wrinkled skin, no doubt the result of spending all her days out in the ocean breezes, and on her hair, which seemed to be turning grayer by the second. Her hair was naturally thick and she’d had her roots permed, which is why it looked so full. The whites of her eyes were as clouded as those of a dead fish on the market stall, as if they had a film over

them. Although you can't diagnose a person as mentally ill based solely on external appearances, it did serve as supplementary evidence; sharing the same sex, Yueh-hsueh felt that the frequency with which a woman washed or cared for her face, the shine in her eyes and sheen of her hair, were at least some sort of basis for evaluating how that woman saw herself.

Yueh-hsueh had longed for a chance for their eyes to meet like this for so long she had made herself ill with it. The only thing that was making her uncomfortable now was thinking about how Chen-Lin's crazed babbling had by chance touched on all the things that had been weighing on Yueh-hsueh's mind recently, as if someone had been here in advance to inform Chen-Lin.

With that thought, Yueh-hsueh felt the need to turn back to Warden Liu and ask for a short break.

"Could you tell me where the bathroom is?"

"Ah, it's on the first floor. You go and we'll take a little break here, that's no problem."

"Great, thank you." Yueh-hsueh glanced quickly at the prison guard there to help with the recording. She raised her chin slightly twice as a way of signaling to him to keep the recording running.

Yueh-hsueh rose from her seat and walked out almost as if she was trying to avoid Chen-Lin Shu-fen's gaze.

"Hah, Professor's talking shite again! You off to look for your mother?" Even after Yueh-hsueh closed the door to the little visitor suite behind her, Chen-Lin's voice reverberated down the corridor. Yueh-hsueh hurried off to head downstairs. She wanted to splash some water on her face to restore her nerves. Chen-Lin Shu-fen had already brought up Huang Jung-wang today, so Yueh-hsueh felt she must at least find out why Huang's daughter had become Chen-Lin's first victim.

Yueh-hsueh had turned into the stairwell and was midway down the first flight when she felt her eyes start to swim. She was forced to grab the handrail and feel her way downward step by step. The further she went, the more it seemed like the temperature was steadily dropping. By the time she reached the second floor it was so cold Yueh-hsueh sneezed. She felt she had no time to think about what was happening. She just had to get to the bathroom and wash her face and things would be fine. She kept repeating this to herself, but at the bottom of the stairs it seemed she wasn't on the first floor but had somehow come out on some intermediary level. She looked back to check and there were stairs leading up behind, while ahead of her was a flight heading down. It was as if the building had grown an extra story. Yueh-hsueh could only imagine that she must be remembering things wrong and continued her descent, but at the bottom of the flight she found the same thing; she had once again come to an intermediary floor. She had already traversed five stories, and the endless stairwell was making her knees weak. Now starting to panic, Yueh-hsueh dry-heaved several times.

She decided to chance it and go down one more flight, but once again she found herself on an intermediary floor. She stopped in the stairwell and looked at the steps leading up and those leading down. The material had changed into a metal mesh that she could see right through;

looking up, she saw no end, and looking down, no bottom either. She kept repeating to herself what Warden Liu had told her, and the layout of the prison grew clearer in her mind with each repetition, but somehow, she couldn't break out of the ever-repeating loop. Yueh-hsueh grabbed the handrail and saw it had begun to steadily rust. Yueh-hsueh gritted her teeth and decided she would stop trying to descend, nor would she turn back; she was going to leave the stairwell and go into the corridor of whatever floor this might be.

Just as when she had arrived at the prison, there was a row of cell doors to either side in pairs facing each other, each made of thick, solid steel with a small window and below that, an opening for passing in meals.

Yueh-hsueh walked past the cells to the far end, where there was a wall with a small window. She wanted to try clambering up to the window so she could see exactly what floor she was on. She had just got her hands onto the window frame and was getting ready to pull herself up when a loud alarm bell began to ring and a red warning light on the wall lit up. The reflector in the light began to revolve so that the red light flashed across the walls. Only now did Yueh-hsueh realize why they painted these walls in green and white stripes: when the red warning light shone on them it made it very easy to spot anything moving.

The alarm bell still ringing, Yueh-hsueh watched as the doors to the two rows of cells all opened simultaneously. She recalled what Warden Liu had told her earlier about the women's wing; there would be around twenty cells on each floor, ten on each side of the corridor, and now they were all open. The nearest of the cells was only three paces away and there was nowhere for her to retreat to; Yueh-hsueh pressed her back hard up against the wall, not knowing what sort of people might be coming out from the cells.

The alarm bell and the flashing warning light sent Yueh-hsueh into a panic, but then she caught hold of herself, thinking most likely she was in the grip of some nightmarish delusion. She tried repeating her calming exercises, clenching her teeth and breathing deeply. The alarm bell, however, showed no signs of stopping, so Yueh-hsueh summoned her courage and decided to walk to the closest cell.

Just as she got there and was thinking to reach out and close the door herself, she saw, quite incredibly, Li Chiao sitting inside, though to say inside the cell wasn't quite right; Li Chiao was sitting at the dining table in their old house. When Li Chiao spotted Yueh-hsueh, she called out to her to come on in.

"Finally remembered to come home, did we?"

Yueh-hsueh's feet seemed to walk her inside of their own accord. As soon as she was in, the steel cell door closed itself behind her. Yueh-hsueh turned back in panic, looking for a way out; the door behind her was closed tight, but it was the ordinary metal door of their old house.

The table was laden with an array of dishes, many of them Yueh-hsueh's favorites.

Most importantly, there was that fish head there.

It was that evening.

"None of the courting these days is the real thing, all you're doing is training up some man to be a husband for someone else, don't go being stupid."

“Cat got your tongue? Don’t give me this attitude, you!”

“If I’d not had you, I’d have gone and made a decent life for myself.”

“Fine then, if you’re so big and clever, move out and sort yourself out, then!”

Li Chiao rattled off these angry words at her like machinegun fire. Yueh-hsueh was going to defend herself but for some reason, when she opened her mouth, no sound came out. Yueh-hsueh remembered Li Chiao saying those things, and that she’d never got to eat any of the food on the table. That evening, she’d run right out the door and spent two nights mooching around the park until, penniless, she was so hungry that she finally had no option but to go home.

This time was different, though. Yueh-hsueh was grown-up now; she could simply turn around and leave without a second thought. Even though she was unable to answer back, she shot Li Chiao a vicious look before pulling the door open, only to be very surprised when she found Warden Liu standing outside, waiting for her.

“Are you OK, Professor Wang?” Warden Liu was sweating as he stared at Yueh-hsueh, “It’s just you’ve been quite some while; I was getting a little concerned, so I came down to see how you were.”

Only now did Yueh-hsueh notice that the metal door she had just pulled open had somehow become the PVC door of a toilet cubicle in the women’s washroom, her hand still holding the doorknob. Warden Liu beat a hasty retreat out of the washroom, lips sucked in with the look of a man sorry to have invaded this space exclusively for women.

For her part, Yueh-hsueh was not even sure if she had used the toilet or not.

Anxiety gripped her throat like acid reflux. If only Ching-fang were here with her now. Yueh-hsueh looked at herself in the mirror, and began her teeth-clenching and deep breathing exercises. She’d come so close to getting useful answers to her questions, this was no time for her to be getting into any sort of state.

Warden Liu climbed back up to the third floor with her and they went back into the visitor suite together.

No alarm bell rang, and there was no red warning light, either. The endless stairwell she had just been on was nowhere to be seen.

As soon as they opened the door to the small visitor suite, the atmosphere in the room changed dramatically.

“This officer here has just been telling me that you’re an assistant to Professor Hsieh.” Chen-Lin Shu-fen had smoothed her hair back into good order and was sitting up straight with her hands crossed together and set comfortably on the table. She had become completely normal, and she responded politely to Yueh-hsueh’s questions. Yueh-hsueh was hard pressed to distinguish between the times Chen-Lin’s mind was clear, when she was putting on an act, and when she was genuinely deranged.

“That’s right, I’m at City University.”

“Then I shall have to be completely honest with you,” said Chen-Lin Shu-fen, “This is all my mother’s fault, you do realize?”

“Take your time.”

Chen-Lin paused a moment, continuing to work away at the sheet of paper on which she had written about her family and doodled various pictures.

“I’ll draw it for you.”

With a few easy lines, Chen-Lin drew a number of things that looked from the size of them like eyeballs.

“What are these?”

“Fish eyes, very nutritious.” They were plainly eyeballs, but there were no eyelids or lashes.

Just as Yueh-hsueh was beginning to think they were losing focus again, Chen-Lin Shu-fen began to talk about her mother.

“My mother always said I should eat plenty of fish eyes as they’re very nourishing. But she said that when she was drunk, so I shouldn’t have believed her.” Chen-Lin asked her own question of Yueh-hsueh, “Do you know the one thing she said to me that was worth believing?”

“I don’t know.”

“You’re going to find out!” Chen-Lin Shu-fen gave a wicked laugh. “Oh yes, and isn’t there someone waiting for you outside? You need to be getting back to City University, or they’ll mark you down as skipping class. You can keep this one; I hope it will be some help to you.”

As she spoke, Chen-Lin Shu-fen arranged the drawings she had made into a neat pile, selecting one of them and pushing it across the table to Yueh-hsueh. She gave a slight smile, provocative, like the smile she had worn in that photograph. Yueh-hsueh had not understood the connection between fish eyes and what Chen-Lin Shu-fen had said. She reached out and turned the picture over, and there on the reverse of all those drawings of fish eyes, Chen-Lin had written the following words:

“The sacrifices I made to bring you up; if only I’d never had you.”

Having kept it in for so long, including throughout the attack of hallucinations in the stairwell, Yueh-hsueh could no longer hold back a sharp cry of shock.

At the sound of Yueh-hsueh’s scream, Chen-Lin Shu-fen threw back her head and burst into crazed laughter, her hands banging madly on the table, the manacles on her wrists clattering loudly. The vigor of her laugh and the strength with which she struck table made it hard to connect this person to the one who had first walked into the visitor suite looking so weak and sickly.

Warden Liu gave a sign for the recorder to be turned off, and then together with the two prison guards, they hauled Chen-Lin Shu-fen to her feet, ready to take her back to her cell. As they dragged her out the door, she shouted out, “Your best friend; I’m your best friend; your best friend!”