

Eric Seiley

Burning Bridges as We Go

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Fear Rides the Train

“Do we say bon voyage or is that something they only say in the movies? Come to think of it, is bon voyage even the right sentiment for someone leaving by train? What do you say, Georgie? How do we say goodbye to Mother after her weekend visit?”

“I don’t know. Maybe good riddance, *you old hag?*” George said harshly.

“Oh, Georgie, that’s not a very nice sentiment to send Mother off with.”

“No it isn’t but screw her. She’s the most wicked of witches.”

“Why do you have to be so cynical?”

“Well, Jennie, you know perfectly well why. You were there all the years she tortured us.”

“Yes, but I decided not to let it ruin my life.”

“And I decided to say screw you. You would too if you weren’t so insistent on being bloody damn polite all the damn time.”

"I know, brother, I know. Well, bon voyage it is then. Au revoir. Adios. Goodbye!" Jennifer chirped brightly, before whispering, "*You old bitch.*"

George smiled. Jennifer knew he would. She took his hand and they faced the departing train, catching sight of Mother three cars down from the end. George shivered seeing her hunched over in her seat knitting.

"Oh Lord. Look, she's knitting," George said.

"Yes, I noticed," Jennifer replied curtly.

Another scarf. Or sweater. Or some such pretense. They knew Mother only crocheted in public as part of her cultivated, "nice old lady" image. But in secret, she delighted in having two long metal knitting needles that didn't so much draw blood when poked hard against a child's skin but did make that child yelp from uncomfortable and sudden, unexpected pain.

"I hate those damn needles. I have nightmares about them impaling me in my sleep," Georgie quivered.

"I know, brother. Steady now. She'll be gone shortly."

Mother, they knew, caused pain - peripherally and directly. Always calculated and always intentional. Indelible pain that burrowed deep in their psyche. But sadly that wasn't the strongest weapon in her arsenal. Not pain nor guilt nor rejection. Fear was. Mother inflicted fear like a baker used salt and yeast - heavily. She laced fear into everything so when friend or teacher or clergy asked about the bruises, cuts, and skin

burns each often appeared with at school or church or playground, anxiety prevented the truth from coming out. Fear of what she would do if they told. Fear of what she would do if they didn't. Fear she would finish what she so often threatened - to toss them in the oven and turn the heat up till both were burnt to crisp and never saw tomorrow again.

George kept quiet until he no longer could. Then, when pressed hard, he spontaneously offered up spelunking as the reason for his numerous scrapes and bruises. Jennifer claimed the more believable rough and tumble sport of lacrosse. Mother never corrected anyone or was in any way disagreeable when guests came calling asking for confirmation. She was invariably polite. And a good actress. Not because she was afraid of strangers finding out what was going on, but because she just didn't trust other people. Ever. So she projected herself to be whatever the visitor wanted. Which often left visitors with two distinct impressions – she was a shy, single mother with a lisp who did the best she could with two high spirited children. And two, her children had “great imaginations, didn't they. Someday they'll be writers.” And they always believed her. She could play the vulnerable mother role to perfection. But in secret, George and Jennifer knew her to be quite the opposite.

“You're right, Georgie. If saying '*screw you*' helps, then by all means let's say '*screw you*.’”

Jennifer knew it helped George to vent. A defense mechanism developed against Mother feeding off his anxiety like candy. Saying *screw you* was George's way of letting go of the tension inflicted. But *screw you* didn't always work. Not for Jennifer at least. She preferred masking for her personal protection. With masking, Mother rarely could

tell when she was afraid. Oh, Mother still tortured her, but never received the full satisfaction of breaking her down into tears of anguish. Just a great big, fixed smile.

“Thanks for saying so, Jennie. It means a lot.”

Looking down the line of railcars, George wondered, “I marvel at how frightful she can be yet no one seems the wiser. Do you remember in second grade when we believed she was Holda? The evil witch from Grimm’s *Hansel and Gretel*?”

“Of course. It was an epiphany. We had just finished reading Children and Household Tales, by Jacob and Wilhelm and realized not only was Mother English and incredibly devious like Holda but liked to inflict evil on her children every day. It fit.”

“Bloody well right it fit!”

Jennifer and George learned early on the best way to protect each other was to love each other. And to find sanctuary away from Mother in the few legitimate places she couldn’t question. School, Jennifer realized, offered a great deal of reprieve on a daily basis during the week. And getting excellent marks reason to be there, and recognition from teachers as to why they stayed longer at school than the other students. Especially since Mother’s range of influence did have some limitations.

Evenings were still Mother dominated times though. And weekends, holidays, and summer break hellish without school to escape to. Then, in seventh grade, Georgie discovered a table with plush chairs hidden behind several bookshelves at the back of the town library. Hardly anyone ever visited there and the library remained open on weekends and during the entire summer. The librarian, Ms. Champerties, was only too

happy to let Jennifer and George occupy the back space as long as they were quiet and studious.

“Man, I loved that back corner. I wanted to live there like Robinson Crusoe. I just couldn’t figure out how to pull it off. I must have read every book in that library too. How many books do you suppose we’ve read?” George asked.

“Well, you certainly more than me, Georgie, if we’re talking literature. But I have you completely in buttons when it comes to mathematics and the sciences.”

“Oh, pish posh. A diamond with a flaw is still better than a common stone that is perfect,” Georgie teased.

“And a brother pulling a B in chemistry shouldn’t let his gob stopper talk,” Jennifer laughed.

Jennifer and George loved each other as only two siblings facing adversity together could. And through their dedication, had become well educated enough to escape off to college together. Fortunate since neither believed they could survive Mother much longer. Emotionally at least. As it was, she had nearly broken them a dozen times over. And would’ve consumed them and tossed their bones out on the trash pile had they not endured for each other. Loved one another. Kept each other safe. Only the strongest love could’ve protected them in such precarious circumstance. Or prevented Mother’s spells from doing permanent damage. So they hoped.

Once, in ninth grade, while covering 20th century history at *Jacob Wilhem*, Jennifer stumbled upon the reason Mother had become such a hideous witch. Or so she imagined.

“Look here, Georgie. Read this,” she said opening up a big history tome and pointing to a paragraph located down toward the middle of the page.

George read.

In 1939, in order to protect its children from the Axis bombings, England implemented Operation Pied Piper and evacuated 827,000 children of school age, including all the children living in Sussex, to ‘neutral locations’ around Europe and to the Americas. A great number of those children were abused only to return to England years later to discover they were also subsequently orphaned. Many never saw their families again.

“Do you think that’s true?” Jennifer asked.

“Sure, why not. It’s written in a history book, isn’t it?” George replied.

“Well, if you believe that, then look at this.” Jennifer pulled out a second book. “I checked this out at the library’s historical documents section while you were in the nurse’s office with a stomachache. It’s a record of all the children evacuated under Operation Pied Piper. Now look down here.” Jennifer unfolded the parchment and slid her finger quickly to the section marked M. “Read this name.”

“Metzler, Hans Ule, born October 10th, 1929, Kent, Sussex County, Southeast England.

Ten years old. Parents Cecil and Delfi Metzler. 637 Mersey Road, Liverpool, Northwest England, L17 6AG. Yeah? So we share the same last name. And?"

"Okay, now read the name below it."

"Metzler, Greta Mina, born January 13th, 1931, Kent, Sussex County, Southeast England. Eight years old. Parents Cecil and Delfi Metzler. 637 Mersey Road, Liverpool, Northwest England, L176AG."

"Well?" Sarah asked.

"Well, what?"

"Hans and Greta Metzler? Ten and eight years old? Did you know Mother had a brother? All this time, she said she was an orphan after her parents were killed during the war."

Jennifer realized their mother's cruelty must have derived from a deep sense of bitter abandonment when Operation Pied Piper separated her from her family, orphaned her, and left her to her own devices. Especially if they stole a beloved brother from her. Jennifer knew she would've been despondent if Georgie had ever been taken from her.

"I knew Mother had a miserable childhood, being an orphan and all. But I wonder if, in some twisted way, she tortures us because of the loss of her brother? Or at least hates seeing how close we are and wants to destroy us because we love each other?" Jennifer commented.

“I don’t think so,” George replied, “That would be pretty mental. And it sounds a bit too fairy tale. But if it is true, she would certainly be further over the bend than even we first imagined.”

With the new information, Jennifer and George could have felt great empathy for Mother had she not been so brutal to them during their entire lives.

“She just seems to be growing barmier than ever. More deranged. I think we need to plan our escape before it’s too late.” Jennifer suggested.

“Well, I’m all for the dog’s bollocks,” George replied. “What do you have in mind?”

It took some hard work but thank God for the education offered at Jacob Wilhelm. Both Jennifer and George pushed themselves academically for several years till they not only qualified for early secondary school graduation early but simultaneously earned acceptance to Oxford. Along with twin scholarships to the Blackwell writer’s program made famous by authors like Amina Gautier, Allison Joseph, and Graham Barnett.

Mother could do little to stop them from leaving once word got out. Especially after Jennifer secretly orchestrated a big write up in the Sussex Times about “two locals done good.” Which George surprisingly invoked clever insight by adding how “Mother” had been the inspiration behind all their hard work. And how, if she had not challenged them to succeed, they might not have been so successful early on in life. Giving Mother the credit, they thought, would satisfy her in some twisted way and end her reign of terror. It had not.

Mother held on tight. She rode the train with them to college, stayed on for “parent’s weekend,” and thereafter began making quarterly trips to Oxford under the premise of visiting her “wonderfully talented” children. Always staying at a nearby hostel - charming the locals and heightening up her aging Mother façade - before returning home. But at home, she was more insidious than ever. Her tortures more fearful, and deeply indwelled.

“I honestly don’t know if I can take another moment of this, let alone the years it’s going to take us to graduate,” George whispered to Jennifer one holiday night after Mother had reduced him to piddling his pants over his refusal to eat her special black pudding with blood sausage. Mother had a way of grinding each child down covertly making it hard to protect oneself for long. “I thought we would be free of her by now, but she just keeps finding ways to burrow in deeper.”

“Yes. I know. I’m barely hanging on myself. She’s become much more antagonistic somehow. We need a new plan before it’s too late.”

Despite all this, Jennifer and George were excelling academically and socially at Oxford. Really starting to blossom. Even using their combined experiences to make quite a name for themselves in the creative fiction department. Their “fable-like short stories reminiscent of the great Hans Christian Anderson” were a common refrain heard among staff regarding stories and select poems published weekly in the University Gazette. Their latest piece, *Children of the Witch*, being all the rage among student and academia alike. One student reviewer even wrote, “*this story evokes the allegorical power of love we all wish for in the face of evil’s esoteric influence over our daily lives.*”

Now, standing on platform number three at Lambourn Station near the Oxford campus, George and Jennifer faced Mother's departing train and waved goodbye as the train slid by. This time, though, both smiled a different kind of smile as Mother departed. The kind of satisfied smile knowing a heavy dose of chemical ethanol - which they laced into her every food during her visit - would be enough poison to kill her within a few days of reaching home while being virtually undetectable after. The kind of smile that knew their mother would be far too superstitious and paranoid to seek medical attention for when the symptoms of toxicity kicked in. She would call no single soul to help. No physician. No friend. Mother would die alone and the twins would happily continue on in a world without her in it.

"Do you think she will suffer?" Jennifer asked.

"If there's a God, yes," George replied.

She would. Mother would go home, feel terrible cramps, drink her foul comfrey tea, and pray to her even fouler witch god to relieve her of her burdens, Jennifer imagined. Which, if George and Jennifer had prepared for correctly, would happen within three days. Only she wouldn't be found conservatively till weeks later. She had no friends or anyone who would likely miss her enough to check in when she went missing. And if she wasn't discovered, Jennifer and George certainly would when they returned home for spring break. George didn't relish the idea of finding Mother in such a state, but he and Jennie had long ago decided no such Mother should ever live after committing the atrocities she had against her own children. As a consequence, they might have to suffer one last ugliness from her.

George and Jennifer smiled and waved - Mother not looking up from her knitting - knowing they would hopefully be receiving the blessed news soon that their mother had died.

“She went quickly. So very sorry, but there was nothing to be done for her,” they imagined the Vicar would say upon his visit to break the bad news.

Jennifer and George would cry and make a show of mourning for sure, so others would believe. But they would never have to smile or cry for Mother again.

The End.