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Burning Bridges as We Go

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3, 127 Words

Author's Note: The Reedsy.com writing prompt began with, 'write a story beginning with the phrase 'bon voyage' and add your own twist. I chose Hansel and Gretel as my twist. Which is what originally followed in Fear Rides the Train, but ended up having too much exposition to include. So I edited it down a great deal of editing and ended with the story you are about to read. What do you think?

Fear Rides the Train

"Do we say bon voyage or is that just something they say in the movies?" Jennifer asked her twin brother, George – who stopped briefly on the platform at Lambourn Station to turn his collar up against the wind and shrug deeper into his peacoat. "Come to think of it, is bon voyage even the right sentiment for someone leaving by train? Or is that only what they say when someone departs by ship? What do you think, Georgie? How should we bid Mother a proper adieu?"

"I'd say, *Good riddance you old hag!* George grumbled. "Which suits me bloody well fine! Who gives a sod whether it's a train or boat or carriage." George was right -- Mother was a curse. An abomination. How they said their goodbyes didn't matter to him -- as long as they said it.

"Oh, Georgie, that's not very nice."

"No, I suppose not, but sod her anyway. She's the most wicked of witches."

"Such cynicism," Jennifer teased, "from such a bright, upstanding fellow. What would Professor Mellani say? Especially in light of you having just received the Brighton Fellowship Award. I'd think you'd be more circumspect. Possibly even cheery considering what that means for your future. Or will cynicism always be your guiding light post?"

"Thank you, Dr. Freud, for your bloody wonderful insight. But it doesn't account for the obvious truth, now does it? Or were you not there all the years she tortured us?"

"Yes, of course. But we don't need to let such unpleasant memories rule our lives, do we? I believe it a matter of choice now that we no longer live within her clutches."

"Bollocks! Choice is an illusion created by power-mongers to distract those without. Cause and effect is the only appropriate *Merovingian* response. I say 'screw her' because that, in effect, is what one should say in the face of such causational horror. You would too if you weren't insistent on being so bloody Mary Poppins all the time. So prim and proper it makes my teeth hurt from the sweetness."

"Well, brother, unlike you Oxford refined gentlemen, we gentile females aren't allowed to be moody or temperamental – lest we be labeled difficult and downright quixotic. And to be singularly pessimistic about Mother seems redundant to the height of ironic disposition. Does not Bernard remind us, '*Do not trouble trouble till trouble troubles you. Do not look for trouble; lest trouble looks for you.*'"

"*Oh Hell's Bells*, now you sound like that posh tosser, Thaddeus. You've been dating him what, not even a month and now you're quoting his favorite author -- that other bloody twit, Bernard Shaw. And just for the record, if you need to quote anyone, at

least choose someone with more depth of character -- like Moliere or Marlow. Shaw wasn't even English."

"But Thaddeus is."

"Yes and I'd say he's turned you into a right molly girl -- believing in fairy tales and love and happy endings and whatnot. Next thing you know, you'll be telling me he's your Prince Charming with a glass slipper come to take you away from it all."

"Well, what's wrong with that? It certainly beats cynicism -- spending all that time in your room writing dark Poe soliloquies just to impress that insipid blond trollop you've been fancy-ing. What's her name? Alice? Amanda? Allison?"

"Bloody Amy and you know it."

"Well, she certainly hasn't lightened your disposition much despite how easily I hear she gives it up. Shagging a rich American isn't substitute for depth of feeling either, you know. But I shan't be addressing that future misstep right now, brother. Or how positively boorish you've become. First, I wish to conclude the appropriate sentiments we should use to mark our mother's departure. How about this?" Jennifer suggested smiling at George as he scowled -- a face delicate in balance, not so dissimilar from her own. "Let us say bon voyage. As well as au revoir, adios, ciao belle, goodbye, and see ya' later!" Jennifer paused before whispering, "*You old bitch.*"

George smiled, as she knew he would. And was glad because they were together in this sentiment even though expressed differently. Jennifer took his hand and he hers as they turned together to face the departing train -- anxiously scanning the passenger cars for their Mother. Only to be disturbed when they caught sight of her three cars down from the end. George shivered. Jennifer's smile hardened.

“Oh Lord. Look, she’s knitting. Bully for her,” George spat. “She never lets up for even one minute, does she!?”

“No, not that I ever noticed,” Jennifer replied curtly.

Another scarf. Or sweater. Or some such pretense. Mother crocheting was well-known among the folk around their hometown of Kentismire. Mainly because she never went anywhere without yarn and darn needles. And often gifted her creations – hats and gloves and scarves -- to the *Widow and Orphan’s* fund at St. Luke’s of Basilica. But Jennifer and George knew she only did so to publicly cultivate her "nice old lady" image. In secret, she delighted in having two long metal knitting needles, used to strike lightning fast when no one was looking, hard against her child's skin. Not to draw blood, but to make that child yelp from discomfort and sudden, unexpected pain. Then look down and innocently inquire, “Is there something wrong, dear?”

“I hate those damn needles,” George quivered. “I have nightmares about them impaling me in my sleep. I can’t even read at night without flinching and spasming every couple of minutes.”

“I know, brother. I know. Steady now. She’ll be gone shortly.”

Typically mothers didn’t cause intentional pain. Or at least that’s what George and Jennifer discovered meeting their classmates at Oxford and hearing them talk about their mothers. Sure, their peers complained about being smothered from too much attention or having to call home regularly or not being allowed to make all their own decisions, but none mentioned being pricked or burned -- cut or physically harmed -- in any way on a regular basis. Most of their friend’s actually loved their mothers. Or at

the very least, appreciated what they provided. Loving mothers, the twins learned, didn't inflict intentional pain on their children and call it love. No.

Jennifer and George's mother offered pain on the regular. Pain and guilt and rejection - like baker's yeast seeded into every interaction to produce a perfect rise of fear. And oh that fear! Fear of everything - used to keep them quiet when friend or teacher or clergy asked about the bruises, cuts, and skin burns Jennifer and George often appeared with at school or church or playground. Fear of what Mother would do. Fear of what she would say. Fear of how she would deny them. *Fear* she wouldn't just deny them, but finish what she so often threatened - to toss them in the oven and burn them to a crisp so neither would ever see the sun again. Her cackle emphasizing how easily she could grind their bones into a lovely broth for the stew pot and no one would be the wiser. Their life at home was a study in isolation.

"Doesn't it boggle the mind?" George commented watching Mother's train rolling away toward the horizon. "How no one ever seems to know who Mother really is. How she's able to appear like everyone's favorite grandmother in public, but be such a terror at home?"

"Magic," Jennifer replied. "The power of a witch's spell cast wide with illusion to manipulate minds. In my *Mythology and Folklore class*, Professor Tomley said all folk tales derive from true historical fact. And that witches still exist today, blended into society of course, undetectable for the most part thanks to their knowledge and skills with potions, but present nonetheless. Mother certainly would qualify as one."

"Doubtful. She's just a disillusioned biddy who suffered abandonment during WWII and turned her own rejection into an evil temperament of injustice and despair. The

rest is just cruelty. But I have been thinking,” and here George lowered his voice to a whisper, “maybe Mother suffers from schizophrenia. I’m taking abnormal psychology with Professor Wellesley and the pathology seems to apply. The paranoia, the delusions, the fractured personality. What do you think?”

It was true. Mother was ill. But she’d learned to hide it well enough from others. And even those who occasionally suspected and came calling to her brightly colored cottage in the woods to investigate rarely learned the truth. Mother always invariably charmed them with tea and biscuits and small talk. Soothed any suspicions and lulled visitors into peaceful ignorance with two distinct impressions – she was a sweetly shy older woman with a lisp who did the best she could with the little God gifted her. And that caring for her two “high spirited children” was more than her frail nerves could handle. Still, she tried her best.

“Oh hell’s bells, you may be right, Georgie. If saying ‘*screw you*’ helps, then by all means let’s say ‘screw you.” Jennifer turned to leave now that Mother’s train had departed out of sight over the horizon. And thought, *I don’t need a psychology class to know if it helps George to vent in such a manner then so much the better for his defense. It’s just saying ‘screw you’ doesn’t work for me.* Jennifer preferred masking as her personal protection, which served to defy Mother’s expectations. Oh, Mother still tortured her, but received little satisfaction knowing Jennifer refused to be emotional about it.

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

“Of course.”

“Do you miss, Ms. Champers?” George asked. “Do you think she knew what was happening to us all those years?”

“The librarian, Ms. Champers? I haven’t thought about her for some time. Where did that come from?”

“She’s been on my mind of late. I’ve been thinking of writing her a letter.”

“Explain, please.”

“Well, I wonder if she knew? About Mother and the abuse? Sometimes, the way she looked at us, I felt like she did. Remember?”

“Not this again, Georgie. It does no good to ruminate. Ms. Chambers was just a nice librarian who didn’t have children of her own so she treated us like her own. And if she did know, or even suspected, I think she would’ve done something about it.”

“Well, I wish she bloody well had. I used to dream about running away and living at the library with her. Like Robinson Crusoe. On an island of books far from Mother.

“At the very least, we had a safe place to read. We must’ve read every book in that library.”

“How many books do you suppose we’ve read?” George asked.

“Well, you’ve certainly read more fiction. Classic literature and the such. But I have you completely in buttons when it comes to math and the sciences. Which some would argue is the more noble pursuit in academia.”

“Oh, pish posh. A diamond with a flaw is still better than a common stone no matter how perfect,” Georgie teased.

“And a brother pulling a C in *Chemistry* shouldn’t let his gob stopper run when his GPA remains inferior to mine.” Jennifer laughed.

“Oh, bollocks to you!” George laughed.

Jennifer and George truly loved each other -- as only two siblings growing up in adversity could. And through their dedication to reading, had become well educated. In their junior year of high school, with the help of Ms. Champers, they’d applied for and earned dual prestige scholarships from the Blackwell Program. Which granted them early acceptance to Oxford University -- George at Exeter for writing and Jennifer with Lady Margaret Hall in the sciences. Which, in turn, allowed them to escape from home a year earlier than anticipated.

Mother could do little to stop them from leaving. Apparently her powers had some limitations. But she held on tight, riding the train with them to college, staying on for “parent’s weekend,” and thereafter making quarterly trips to Oxford their entire freshman and sophomore year under the premise of visiting her “wonderfully talented” children. Always staying at a nearby inn where she continued to charm the locals and heighten her sphere of influence with tea and biscuits. As it stood, she’d recently mentioned her intent to sell her beloved “candy” cottage and move closer Oxford. She

missed her children so. But Jennifer and George knew this was pretense – and the closer proximity would only increase her influence and make their escape mute. Her power over them might've temporarily diminished, but moving closer would make her more dangerous. She just wouldn't let go.

"If Mother moves here, I honestly don't know how long I will be able to tolerate it," George whispered to Jennifer. "This last week has been so bloody horrible."

For both of them. Winter break found Mother at their doorstep, having brought along her special *black pudding with blood sausage*, insisting the twins eat up every bite before she left. She even coordinated with the hotel concierge to set up a quiet little evening dinner the night before she left so they could do just that. Which had the hotel staff all commenting on what a "truly lovely gesture" and "wonderful mother" she was. Both twins ate what they could, mostly in fear of what Mother would do if they did not. But upon returning to their flat on campus, both felt terribly ill – so sick their dreams were filled with images of witches and spoiled candy and gas hot ovens burning them to a crisp.

"I thought we'd be free of her by now, but she just keeps finding ways to hang on. Burrow in deeper. I don't think we'll ever be free of her if we don't do something soon," George nearly cried.

"Yes. I know. I've come to that conclusion myself. I'm barely hanging on. She's become so much more antagonistic somehow now that we no longer live with her. We need a plan before it's too late."

It didn't take them long to come up with one. They were precocious, sure, but their intellect wasn't in doubt. Jennifer knew the right chemistry to employ. George the right story to tell. So before leaving Lambourn Station, George suggested they walk back to campus so they could privately discuss implementing their plan. Which they would put into effect on the next of Mother's visits during spring break.

And so, just a few months later, Mother returned for spring break. Fussing over both in public, while striking at them in private. Till the last day and their hotel garden dinner. Which they used, in turn, to prepare something for her – something she couldn't refuse with all the hotel staff looking on.

At the end of the week, once again, the twins found themselves standing on platform number seven at Lambourn Station watching for Mother as her train departed. It'd been a very challenging week, but both felt a sense of relief, believing life was about to dramatically change for them all.

"So far," George whispered, "everything seems to be going well, I think. She doesn't seem to suspect a thing. And the speed with which you whipped up that little witches brew was quite impressive. She didn't hesitate to drink it all."

Jennifer smiled a different kind of smile this time. The kind that knew, thanks to her exacting courses, a heavy dose of chemical arsenic ethanol - which she'd heavily laced into Mother's drink - would be enough poison to kill her within a few days of reaching home. And be virtually undetectable after. "I think so. I could tell it was starting to take effect as she climbed aboard the train. Her face was looking more ashen than usual."

“Do you think she’ll ring the hospital when she starts feeling poorly?”

“No. She’s far too superstitious and paranoid for that. When did you ever see her go to the doctor or seek medical attention? For herself or us?”

“True. All she ever did was make that foul comfrey tea and force us drink it by the gallon. Do you think she will suffer?”

“If there’s a God, yes,” Jennifer replied.

She would. Mother would go home and, within a few hours, feel the terrible cramps beginning. She would make herself her foul comfrey tea -- which Jennifer knew would interact harshly with the ethanol arsenic still in her system – and amplify the poison process. Which would cause seizures followed almost immediately by cardiac arrest. Mother would die in pain, but wouldn’t be found conservatively for at least a week. Maybe longer. She had no real friends or family who visited her. And her shopping visits to town were on a monthly, not daily basis. Still, anyone who would likely miss her wouldn’t necessarily notice or come calling. And if she wasn’t discovered within, oh say two weeks, it would fall to Jennifer and George to notify authorities. George didn’t relish the idea of someone else finding Mother, but he knew had to allow it. They needed the alibi of being away at college rather than risking an “unannounced” visit home. Jennifer agreed. If they discovered her, it would look too convenient. And therefore suspiciously out of character. So, after two weeks without word, they called the local constable pretending “worry” over not having heard from their dear, elderly Ma.

George and Jennifer secretly smiled at each other when the call was placed. If karma was kind, they'd hopefully receive the blessed news back that their mother had died unexpectedly. The constable would surely call their Oxford Chancellor first, along with the school Vicar, to break the news.

"My dear children," George imagined the Vicar sympathizing. "My sincere condolences but there was nothing to be done for her. I am very sorry for your loss."

No one would know. No one would suspect. It would all look like the natural death of an old woman who lived alone after her children had departed home for college. The proverbial "empty nest" syndrome leading to a broken heart.

Jennifer and George would act upset. Oh, they would cry, of course, and make a show of their grief. So others would believe. But no one would suspect George and Jennifer Gretel had precipitated their Mother's demise. No one would believe she died at their hands. And when all was said and done, neither would they. Because they finally would be granted a happy endings and never have to worry or cry over Mother again. Fairy tales, as they say, surely do come true, when they happen to me and you.

Still, the Huntsman who watched over the forest, and had long been under their Mother's spell, wasn't so convinced.

The End.

