

Eric Seiley

Burning Bridges as We Go

December 2022

4, 415 Words

Cold Tombstone

The storm was a rumor come true and now the sky was delivering. Heavy rain and sharp lightning crashing down -- till thunder called everything back into darkness again.

Paige didn't mind. It made the cemetery feel lyrical somehow. Note perfect when visiting the gravestone of one's sister. One's dead *twin* sister, who honestly, hadn't been any nearer and dearer in life than she was now buried six feet under.

"Happy birthday, sister," Paige spoke aloud to the tombstone, tracing her finger across the name chiseled there -- Madeline Tallulah Millbrae, Daughter and Sister, 1994 to 2012. "I hope you're doing well. You might not believe this, but it's been a year since we last spoke. A WHOLE year! I'm sorry for not visiting sooner, but I started college in the fall and, you know, with classes and social life and all, busy, busy, busy. Plus it's true what they say, time *does* fly when you're having fun. Oh, I have so much to tell you."

With every lightning strike, Paige crossed herself, kissing the Virgin Mary pendant hanging at her neck, offering a Prayer of Deliverance for her sister. Madeline --- or "Maddie" as she was called in life -- would've been annoyed with such religious affectation going on above her grave. She'd always been the pragmatic sister who

insisted on logic and reason above such superstition and fairy tale. Which included rejecting Paige's embrace of Catholicism.

"Don't think me insincere when I say I feel closer to you now," Paige commented. "Cause I do. I understand you so much better. Sure, we weren't necessarily friends when you were alive, but neither were we enemies. At least not from my end. Just polar opposites who had a hard time showing tenderness. You know what I mean?"

Most of their lives, Paige and Maddie held opposing reputations within their family -- one for being good and the other bad respectively -- not always earned, but consistently applied. Paige always the good. Maddie the bad. Angel and devil. Yin and yang. Sweet and sour. They'd been born physically identical twins with nary a physical difference, which meant most people couldn't tell them apart. But their personalities, if one were to pay close enough attention, weren't as aligned as their bodies.

It was true not many could tell them apart. Not physically. Even their mother, Sandy, couldn't tell. Not when changing diapers, or washing their tiny, chubby bodies with soap and water, or breast feeding. One was an exact duplicate of the other. But she could certainly tell Paige was the good baby and Maddie the bad. She knew it deep in her bones. Which is what she told the girls' father when he returned home from work questioning why she was quietly cuddling Paige while Maddie lay next to her in the bassinet crying.

"They're not the same. They may look the same, but they're not," Sandy insisted. "This one," pointing down at Maddie, "is much worse somehow. She'll watch me. Watch everything I do without making a peep. But, ohh, let me pick up Paige, or feed her, or hold her, and this one'll start crying and carrying on. Then when I do pick her up, to feed or cuddle her, she'll bite down hard on my nipples till they bleed. And, I swear, she giggles when I yelp in pain."

"She's a baby," their father replied. "I doubt she's trying to be anything but be a baby. A hungry baby at that. But maybe she's also colicky. We have an appointment with the pediatrician next week, but I think I'll call Dr. Rankin now and re-schedule for an earlier time. Have her checked out to be on the safe side."

"No, I don't think you're hearing me. Maddie's not colic-y nor is it some infant malady. She's just different. Somehow more, oh I don't know, insidious or something."

"That's crazy. Babies aren't anything but babies. All they need is to be cared for. But you're tired, I can see that. The pregnancy was hard on you and you need rest. Things'll look much clearer after you get some sleep. Why don't you go lie down while I look after the twins?"

But Sandy never saw things differently. Paige was good, Maddie was evil -- plain as day and night. Where Paige made her feel like a loving mother, cooing and cuddling the day away, Maddie was the kind of baby that made you understand why so many mothers shook their babies by nightfall. Always demanding, always crying, always red faced. Never settled.

Nor did it change as the twin babies grew into twin toddlers.

"Caring for Paige is effortless," Sandy tried to explain to their increasingly disinterested father one evening after he returned home to find Maddie locked in the hallway closet he hung his overcoat in. "She just gets it. She's sweet and kind and picks up after herself. Does what she's asked. Not so with Maddie. There's something about her -- she'll do the same things, but in a way you know she's just bidding her time. Did you know Maddie likes to sneak into rooms and watch without a sound? And if you happen to notice her and yelp in surprise, she'll laugh and walk away like nothing happened. She does it so much, I feel like it isn't safe to sit down in my own house. I always feel nervous. Like she's planning something evil."

"She's just being a playful little girl," her father argued. "All children play hide and seek. It's a game."

"No, I don't think so. And there are other things too. Like do you know I found a kitchen knife in the girls' room today when I went up to wake them from their nap? It was under Paige's bed, but I know Maddie put it there. And I could see Maddie lying there, watching and smirking. I'm also certain the knife wasn't there when I put them down. That's why she needed to be locked in the closet today."

"Maddie and Paige are five years old," their father growled. "I don't think they even understand such things. You're casting dispersions over benign moments when you should be more careful. You probably had the knife with you after lunch and didn't realize you were holding it. Which makes me concerned you're growing unbalanced again. Remember the Prolixin pills the doctor prescribed? Are you taking them?"

"I don't like those pills. They make everything feel...oh, I don't know...so muted and muffled."

"The doctor said it might take a little time to get used to the medication, but they would be incredibly helpful stabilizing your mood swings. So you should take them. Here, let me go get one for you and you can take it with some water in front of me."

Sandy never felt stable, but she took the pills. And went to confession to implore the priest, Father Murphy, to understand. "Forgive me, Father, but in my heart I love Paige more than Maddie. Paige is a loving child where Maddie is harsh and vengeful. I know it deep in my bones. A mother knows."

"Oh, my dear, children are a gift from God. And God would no more give you a vengeful child than a vengeful heart. He loves all His children and wants you to raise them under the sacred promise of Our Holy Father's Divine word. So let the Virgin

Mary be your guide and have patience. For your sins, say three *Hail Mary's* and five *Our Father's*. Until next week then, God be with you."

During her late night prayers, Sandy begged God, "Please Lord, take Maddie and her wickedness from me. Just leave me with Paige." But God refused to listen.

Sandy felt trapped, which led to thoughts of suicide. Suicide and pedicide. Both unforgivable sins, she knew, but considerations, nonetheless. But, for Paige's sake, she wouldn't go beyond prayers. Just push it all down and do as expected. Take the pills the doctor prescribed and soldier on like a good catholic wife and mother -- cooking, cleaning, sewing, and all the duties of a stay at home mother running a household.

Despite nothing ever being overtly said to them, both girls grew up knowing this. All throughout their formative years, and well into their pre-teen and teenage years, it was plain to both. Paige, for her part, felt sorry for her mother and the burden her illness imposed. So she chose to be what her mother wanted. She became pleasing. Neat and tidy, thoughtful and caring. Always with a bright smile. Always sweet. Coquettishly giggling whenever someone complemented on her increasing beauty. Quick to help should anyone have need. The kind of girl next door everyone wanted to be around.

Maddie, for her part -- who was equally as beautiful as Paige and could've chosen the same path -- did not feel sorry for her mother. She despised Sandy and her weakness of character. And refused to be all sweetness and kindness and princess in pink for her. She truly wanted a loving family, but the reality was, despite looking like a proper family on the outside, inside, her mother was broken, her father apathetic, and her sister a mewling, sycophant.

Maddie hated her family – the way her mom catered to Paige, the way Paige ate it up like she deserved it, sure the world would treat her the same because she was she. The way their father no longer cared, long ago becoming disenchanted, concerned only with

his own interests. That kind of ignorance held little redeeming factor for her. She wanted to leave. But, until she turned eighteen, Maddie knew she couldn't. Not without resources. After high school though, her father would send her away to college and she'd use the time wisely. Then, once graduated, she would get a career and earn her own money and be who she wanted. No one could stop her. And she wouldn't have to pretend. It all just made her so angry and resentful.

In the meantime, Maddie held no qualms against entertaining herself and exacting some measure of revenge for the injustice of her family prejudices. At least so long as she wasn't too obvious.

Maddie, whenever she felt the urge, took pains to imitate Paige in dress and demeanor. Which fooled most everyone and annoyed Paige to no end, though she wouldn't admit it. It also gave Maddie a bonus twist – when in "Paige mode," if she made sarcastic comments or cunningly hurtful observations or guilt inducing barbs to their mother, Sandy would react like she'd been gut punched -- hurt and confused. Not understanding why Paige would say such a thing to her. Till she realized it was Maddie, and felt better. Maddie was "the mean and evil one."

Maddie tormented Paige too. Hiding homework she'd worked hard on so she couldn't find it the day it was due, only to have it re-appear a week later. *Accidentally* leaving an open bottle of ink on her chair in calligraphy class just as she sat down – ruining her brand new cheerleader's skirt. Defacing her favorite posters. Childish stuff like that.

Then, at the beginning of their senior high school year, Paige got a boyfriend -- a sweet Catholic boy who went to confession every week and was almost too good and adorable to be true. He became fair game too.

"Aren't you two just the perfect couple. You being the head cheerleader this year," Maddie observed, "and him the captain of the football team?! How wonderful. But

how cliché can you be!? Why don't you just hike up your skirt now and get date raped before prom so you can save yourself a torn cheerleader outfit. Then drop out of high school when you become pregnant and become the good catholic wife and mother you so want to be? Or maybe your boyfriend will insist you have an abortion cause he doesn't want the shame? Of course, it is shameful of you and Dad will kick you out of the house and you'll have to start waitressing downtown because you can't do anything else. But, ahh, true love."

"What terrible things to say! How can you even imagine such things? Let alone say them out loud!?"

"I just call them like I see them."

"Well, nothing like that will ever happen to me. I'm not like that nor is Jason! He's good. And kind. And he loves me. And I love him," Paige replied defensively. "Why, do you know we've gone out three months and he's been the perfect gentleman. Never tried anything inappropriate or bad. And do you know what else? He hasn't mistaken me for you once during our whole time together! Not once! Don't you think that says something about him?"

"It's not hard to distinguish you from me when you wear your stupid cheerleader outfit all the time. Don't be so naive."

"No, he sees me. He really does. He's very sensitive. And he's good. He hasn't tried to pressure me about anything. All he does is hold my hand. Isn't that sweet?"

"Sounds like he might like boys instead."

"No, he's straight. He's just sweet and honest and good."

"If you say so."

But that gave Maddie an idea. A better way to screw her sister over.

"Your boyfriend, Jason, stopped by the house today," Maddie told Paige a few weeks later. Football season had ended and basketball was the new winter sport Paige and Jason were caught up in. Winter also meant a change to the cheerleader outfits -- heavier skirts and sweaters replacing the summer/fall lighter pleated skirts and sleeveless jerseys. Which provided Maddie with the opportunity to "borrow" Paige's summer/fall set without Paige knowing. And wearing it when she wasn't around.

"Jason wanted to talk to you about the winter formal, but I think that was just pretense. He seemed very keen on finding you home alone. Like he really wanted to take your relationship to the next level, you know. Only you weren't here. But don't worry, I set him straight."

Paige looked at her sister in confusion. She'd just returned home from cheerleading practice and wasn't clear what Maddie was talking about. "What you mean? Jason knew I had practice after school today and wouldn't be seeing him till later," Paige replied. "We're going to the church barbecue tomorrow and then up to the lake with friends for a bonfire."

"Well, tra-la-la. Aren't you the special girl? Jason certainly thinks so."

Now what does that mean? Paige wondered as Maddie walked away laughing.

There was no video evidence of Paige having sex with Jason. Nor any direct recording. Though there were almost two dozen polaroids Jason took that day -- photos showing a partially nude "Paige," lying on her bed in just her cheerleading short skirt and sleeveless sweater, striking several provocative poses. Which did infer a great deal.

"Only for personal use," is what Jason was led to believe. "Kept right here in my jewelry box whenever you want to look."

But some were placed in their mother's diary. And a few mailed to their father's office downtown where his receptionist would open the letter and inform him. And a few sent to Jason's home, addressed to his parents. And just one for Paige's priest – because Maddie always suspected he was a perv for her.

Their mother, Sandy, just couldn't believe it. Or understand why Paige would do such a thing. She'd always been a good girl. But it was plain to see it was Paige in her cheerleader outfit, with her hair pulled back in her regular ponytail, in the photos.

"What have you done, Paige?!" Sandy cried that evening. "Did that boy force you?! He must have because you wouldn't have done it otherwise."

"I didn't do anything, Mother! That wasn't me!" Paige knew it wasn't her. Sure the photos were identical to her, but it wasn't her! Of course it wasn't! "That's Maddie in those photos with Jason! Not me!"

Sandy believed her. Of course it was Maddie. She was the evil one. How could she have believed otherwise.

Maddie protested, angrily defending herself. But it was an act. It wasn't true. Nor was her alibi. "Don't pawn your filth off on me, Paige! How dare you! You all know very well I was dropping off care packages while visiting the seniors at Our Lady of the Holy Night Care Home. As I've done every Friday afternoon since school began. Not to mention I have a receipt and the charge nurse will vouch I was there."

It worked enough that their father believed Maddie. But he didn't really care.

Jason's parents cared. And believed it had been Paige. Because Jason already admitted to them what he and Paige had done. And then immediately went to the priest for absolution – confessing he'd gone over to Paige's house that afternoon, at her request, and the whole thing had been her idea. She'd initiated the photo session and he'd gone along with it. She'd undressed, and he'd gone along with it. She'd...well, touched him

and he went along with it. Because he couldn't resist Paige. She was temptation and him too weak and powerless to resist. But it had been Paige, he knew that much.

Paige angrily confronted Maddie that night. "You're sick! You're horrible! I'll never forgive you for what you've done! As of this moment, I refuse to be your sister. And when I go away to college, I'll never speak with you ever again."

"I don't have a clue what you're talking about," Maddie remarked, all innocent. "If you're feeling guilty over committing such a terrible sin, don't transfer that onto me. Go to church and ask God to forgive you!"

"It was you and you know it! I hate you!"

"Now, Paige," Maddie smiled, "how can you say such a terrible thing? You're not so goody-goody after all, are you?"

Paige had an existential break down. First she broke up with Jason. Then she dropped out of cheerleading and all her other, after school activities. She stopped volunteering at the church and even stopped going to school for a while. She just stayed at home, locked in her room. Only coming out briefly for food.

"Why should I do anything?" she told her mother, "When Maddie's just going to ruin it. She won't leave me alone – always copying me, always commenting on anything good I have and then trying to destroy it. She's horrible, and I can't take it any longer."

Everyone was concerned for a time. Till her father threatened Paige, telling her she either returned to school or lose her chance at moving away to college. Paige agreed and returned. But it was Sandy who came up with their cover story. Paige would tell everyone she'd had a spiritual awakening and was going to enter the convent after graduation to become a nun. So other than school, she would spend most of her evenings at the church and her nights at home studying. No one really questioned it –

Paige had always been a nice, sweet Catholic girl. And no one had seen the pictures, not yet at least, though there were a few rumors starting to be whispered about. Still, by and large, everyone accepted the cover story and reassured Paige how much they liked her, how much they'd missed seeing her around, and how all wished her the best.

Maddie hated it. She hated their ignorance. She hated their poverty of thought and the injustice of it all. But, most of all, she hated Paige.

Lightning spliced through the night again bringing Paige out of her reverie. She quickly traced the lettering on the grave stone again and whispered, "To be honest. I'm glad you're dead. I know that's not a nice thing to say, but it's true. Surprisingly, Mama doesn't feel the same way. She's confused about what happened that day and thinks the wrong twin might've died. Can you believe that? She doesn't believe I'm Paige. Poor woman has gone completely off her nut. Of course, I'm a little surprised how perceptive she has been since your death. Parents can really surprise you sometimes, you know. Hey, speaking of parents! Dad officially moved out and is divorcing Mom. He's still paying for Mom to live at the house, for now. And he's paying for college, like he promised. And get this! He promised to open up my trust fund and turn it over to me once I graduate. So the future is looking good."

The lightning crashed again, lighting up the graveyard, sending Paige into a spasm of crossing herself and saying prayers.

"Oh! And get this! After your funeral, the insurance company ruled on Dad's appeal. The judge said they can't withhold payout, or cancel the policy, after your death was officially classified as "accidental," but not an "act of God." So they had to honor the contract and pay. Dad received four hundred and fifty thousand dollars from the insurance company for your death, and another two hundred and fifty thousand paid out to the surviving sibling. Which is me. And since I'm officially over eighteen, that

money comes straight to me. I also received another one hundred thousand separately for suffering the trauma of seeing you die so violently. Don't you think that's fortuitous?"

Lightning cracked and the thunder boomed like a recrimination from the grave.

"Oh, don't be angry! I am sorry in my own way. It's not like I planned your *murder*. Well not really. Not the way it happened. But when the universe offers up an opportunity, you have be smart and grab it, right? And I, as you well know, am nobody's fool."

Paige thought back to the day Maddie died. At least the day everyone believed Maddie died. But, actually Paige had died. And Maddie who lived. A little confusing, but here's how it happened.

Sandy let the girls take the station wagon to school on rainy days. And so it was that day. Raining. Paige drove in the morning, so it was Maddie's turn to drive them home. Only when she opened the garage and drove in to park, Paige reminded her, "Mom will want keep Dad's car in the garage so you should just park the car in the driveway now. Before she gets home and complains. And I'm not going to take the blame either because you drove us and knew better. I'll tell her that too!" Paige then got out of the car and slammed the door shut.

Maddie, a little pissed, sat for a second thinking how much she loathed Paige. She then threw the car into reverse and backed out -- realizing too late that Paige had walked behind the station wagon and she hadn't checked. Bump, bump.

"If you hadn't been so annoying, I wouldn't have been distracted and backed over you."

When Maddie heard the thud of hitting Paige, she instinctively slammed on the brakes. But then she realized...and then she thought about it....and then she took her foot off the brakes and let the car continue rolling backwards till the next satisfying bump of running over her sister could be felt. Because she had a plan, which she immediately put into action.

Maddie got out of the car, closed the garage door and ran upstairs before anyone saw. Quickly washed up, pulled her hair back in a ponytail, and changed into Paige's cheerleader outfit – the one Paige hadn't been wearing since 'the polaroid incident.' Maddie then hurried back downstairs having made herself look like Paige. And grabbed Paige's backpack, with her wallet and student ID, exchanging it for her own. Now the transition was near complete. Maddie was "Paige" and Paige was "Maddie" lying dead on the ground. All she had to do now was convince everyone else how "Paige" had accidentally, and tragically, backed over "Maddie."

Maddie called 911 and started CPR – which was just for show and ensured plenty of blood would get splashed around. Nor was it hard to be hysterical. She felt nearly there herself. Thankfully, no one questioned "Paige's" account of events – she was the good girl. Not the paramedics, the firemen, the police, they all just accepted her word as authentic. Even going so far as to comfort the obviously hysterical, pretty girl in a cheerleading outfit.

Would all of you have gone this far if you knew I was Maddie and not Paige?! Maddie wondered. Well, screw you and screw her. I'm getting a new life.

Everyone believed her. But soon, over the next several weeks at home, Sandy realized "Paige" might not be Paige. "Paige," though physically indistinguishable from her sister, was behaving more like Maddie. And might even be Maddie. A mother knows these things. But after years of making wild accusations, no one wanted to hear any

more of Sandy's crazy conspiracies. Not her priest and certainly not her husband. And certainly not "Paige."

"So you see, sister, everything has turned out for the best. And being you is ever so much fun. Everyone is super nice to me now and no one looks at me like I'm some evil doppelganger. Or like some inferior piece of trash compared to you. Well, Mom suspects, but she's always been off her nut, so who cares. And Jason is happy to be dating you again. He matriculated to the same college and has been, well, very affectionate and decidedly less, Catholic, shall we say. I'm doing super well in my classes too and am thinking of declaring pre-med as my major. I might even become a doctor thanks to you. Your death sort of inspired me to look into the medical field of study."

The storm clouds finally parted, easing up on the rain, letting the night stars shine through.

"Ohh my, look at the time. It's getting late. Sorry, sister, but I have to go. I'm supposed to meet Jason in an hour. We're going to a rush party for a fraternity he wants to join. I might follow his lead and apply to a few sororities too. In the meantime, rest easy sister. Thank you for being such a good listener."

"Paige" traced her fingers across the name etched on the gravestone. Madeline Tallulah Millbrae.

"Rest in peace, sister. I'll visit again when next I have the chance. I promise."

The End.