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Burning Bridges as We Go

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## **Fear Rides the Train**

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

“I say, *Good riddance you old hag!* George grumbled. “Which suits me bloody well fine! Who gives a sod whether it’s by train or boat or carriage.” George was right -- Mother was a curse. A witch. An abomination. How they said their goodbyes didn’t matter so long as they said them.

“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 an upstanding fellow. What would Professor Mellani say? Especially in light of you having just received the Brighton Fellowship Award for Excellence in Writing. One would think you’d be more

circumspect. Possibly even cheery considering what such an achievement 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 refined gentlemen, we gentile females aren't allowed to be moody or temperamental – lest we be labeled difficult and downright quixotic. Not to mention being 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, but 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 American 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, 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 to face the departing train to Cumberland – anxiously scanning the passenger cars for Mother. And disturbingly catching 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.

Another scarf. Or sweater. Or some such pretense. Mother's crocheting was well-known among the folk around their hometown of Kentsmire. Mainly because she never went anywhere without yarn and darn needles. And often gifted her creations – hats and gloves and scarves and the like -- 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 each 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, physical or emotional. Or at least that's what George and Jennifer discovered once they left home and meet their Oxford classmates' parents. Sure, their peers complained about feeling smothered from too much attention or being duty bound to call home regularly. Or how they weren't being allowed to make all their own decisions even though they'd matriculated to college.

But nothing about being pricked, cut, or burned. Or harmed physically in any way on the regular. In fact, most of their friend's actually loved their mothers. And vice versa. Loving mothers, the twins learned, didn't inflict intentionally pain on their children and call it love. No.

Jennifer and George's mother did. 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 -- fear of her. 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 deny them, but punish with what she so often threatened - to toss them in the oven and burn them alive so neither would ever see the sun again. Her cackle emphasizing how easily she could grind their bones into a lovely broth for her stew pot and no one would be the wiser. Their life at home a study in isolation.

"Doesn't it boggle the mind?" George commented watching Mother's train build steam toward the horizon. "How no one ever seemed to know who Mother really was. How she's always been 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. But present, nonetheless. Mother certainly qualifies."

"I thought that when I was younger reading about Hansel and Gretel. But now I'm convinced Mother's just some disillusioned biddy who suffered abandonment during WWII and turned her own rejection into an evil temperament of cruelty and despair. The rest is just injustice, I think," and here George lowered his voice to a whisper. "I also believe Mother suffers from schizophrenia. I've been taking an abnormal psychology unit with Professor Wellesley and the pathology seems to fit. The paranoia, the delusions, the fractured personality. What do you think?"

It was true. Mother was mentally ill. What mother could do such things to her children and not be. But she'd also learned to hide it well enough from others. And even those who occasionally came calling to her brightly colored cottage in the woods to investigate, rarely learned the truth. Mother always invariably charmed them -- with tea, biscuits, small talk and well seeded lies. Soothed any suspicions and lulled visitors into peaceful ignorance with two distinct impressions -- she was a shy and sweet older woman with a lisp who did the best she could with the little God gifted her. And that caring for 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*'. But let's not give her a label to excuse her behavior." Jennifer turned to leave now that Mother's train had departed out of sight. "But if it helps you, I support your choice." Jennifer preferred masking behind a pleasant persona 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 from junior school in Kentsmire? That 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. And if she did know, or even suspected, I'd like to 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 away from Mother.

"That would've been interesting. As it was, we did spend a great deal of time there, didn't we. And 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 learning, had become sufficiently educated to apply for early acceptance to Oxford. George won a writing scholarship to Exeter with the Blackwell Program while Jennifer out shone them all and was awarded a Rhodes scholarship for the sciences at Lady Margaret Hall. Which in turn, granted both escape from home a year earlier than anticipated.

Mother could do little to stop them from leaving -- her powers having 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 years 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. And mentioned to how she was thinking about selling her



beloved “candy cottage” in Kentismire just to move closer to Oxford and her darling children. She missed them so.

But Jennifer and George knew Mother’s reasons for moving were pretense – the closer proximity would serve to increase her power – which had diminished significantly with their escape to Oxford. Both knew though, if Mother moved closer, she would re-assert her control and they would never escape her clutches. She just wouldn’t let go.

“If Mother moves here, I honestly don’t know how long I’ll be able to tolerate it,” George whispered to Jennifer. “This last weekend was bloody horrible. Could you imagine her being close by every week in and week out?!”

Mother never stopped. Winter break found her at their doorstep. Same with holidays and spring break and the long days of summer when the twins refused to return home – leaving Mother to travel to them. Then, just this last week, Mother appeared unexpectedly at their doorstep, carrying her special *black pudding with blood sausage*, which she insisted the twins eat up every bite. She was so worried for their health and how well they were eating without her, she claimed. The following night, she coordinated with their dorm mates to set up a quiet little evening dinner for them all, with Mother providing numerous dishes of comfort, so each and every one of their mates were also comforted. Their mates loved it. Going so far as to comment on what a “truly lovely gesture” and what a “wonderful mother” the twins had.

When Mother finally left for her hotel, and their mates back to their own rooms, the twins collapsed in bed, feeling terrible and exhausted – only their dreams that night were filled with images of witches smothering them with spoiled candy before tossing each into a hot oven to burn them to a crisp. Neither slept well.

“We have to do something about Mother,” George grumbled. “I thought we’d be completely free of her by now, but she just keeps finding ways to burrow in deeper. I don’t think we’ll ever be free of her if we don’t do something soon,” he cried.

“Yes. I know. I’ve come to that conclusion myself. I’m barely hanging on truth be told. She’s become so much more insidious somehow now that we no longer live with her. We need to make 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. And put their plan into motion upon the eve of their Mother’s next visit.

And so, just a few weeks later, after winter break had begun and all their mates gone for the holidays, Mother returned. Fussing over both in public while striking at them in private. Till the last day. Jennifer surprised Mother by offering her a box of chocolates before she boarded train number six at Lambourn Station. A parting gift to let her know how much she and George appreciated all she’d done for them. Mother’s surprise was brief though. She was in public and made a big spectacle of how wonderful and kind and thoughtful her children were. She even, both twins swore later, teared up.

Jennifer and George had known for some time their Mother’s only secret vice was chocolates in Bordeaux style. She couldn’t resist them, so limited their presence in her home. No mention was made of it, and no one ever acknowledged it. But the twins knew and used it to their advantage when the time came. Jennifer had injected the

chocolates with a specially made, chemical arsenic ethanol, using the bourdeau to cover the taste. Knowing, once Mother boarded the train and was out of sight, she'd did into the box and consume the entire box before reaching home. Life was about to dramatically change for them all.

"So far," George whispered to Jennifer, hailing a cab to drive them back to the dorms, "everything seems to be going well. She doesn't seem to suspect a thing. And the speed with which you whipped up that little witches brew was quite impressive. I almost believed Mother when she exclaimed, 'Oh what a wonderful surprise.' Her eyes were certainly gleaming in anticipation."

Jennifer smiled a different kind of smile this time. The kind that knew, thanks to her STEM courses, once Mother consumed a dozen or so arsenic ethanol bourdeau chocolates, there'd be enough poison coursing through her blood to kill her within a few days after reaching home, but then dissipate without any detectable trace later.

"Do you think she'll ring the hospital when she starts feeling poorly?" George asked.

"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 anything outside the cottage?"

"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 unable to call for help. And since she had no real friends or family who visited her, the chances of her being discovered was conservatively weeks, maybe a month, when she would be missed in town by some shopkeeper who realized Mother had not turned up for her regular monthly shopping trip. Knowing her children were away at university, the shopkeeper might grow worried and send for the constable to initiate a welfare check. And the constable, in turn, discovering their Mother long since deceased. All appearances looking like a heart attack.

George and Jennifer secretly smiled at each other. If karma was just and kind, they'd hopefully be receiving the blessed news back that their mother had died unexpectedly within the month. The constable would ring Oxford, the Chancellor would delegate the news to the school Vicar, who would, in turn, hand the task of break the news over to the lowest priest in the delegation. The priest would pay them a visit shortly after.

"My dear children," George imagined the priest 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. There might even be talk of a "broken heart" leading to the heart attack since everyone knew how much their Mother had doted on her children and seemed so lost without them.

Jennifer and George, in true British fashion, try to remain stoic. For appearances sake.

“Oh my dear children,” the priest would sympathize, “you can still be brave and shed a tear for your dear ma.”

So they would cry and make a show of their grief till everyone believed. But no one would suspect how happy George and Jennifer Gretel were knowing they were free. And when all was said and done, after finally being granted their happy ending, neither would ever 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 of Cumberland, who watched over the forest of Kentsmire and its people, wasn't so convinced the Mother of the Cottage had died naturally. Or that her twins were so innocent.

The End.