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Burning Bridges As We Go

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What Happens in Vegas

Lily deserved this vacation. But her husband was ruining it.

“Roger? How much longer?”

“Huh?”

“How much longer? Because we have dinner reservations at six.” Lily wanted to slap the back of his head to get his attention. Hard. Because he was ignoring her and wouldn’t turn away from the bloody slot machine. But she resisted the urge. In all their fifty years of marriage, she’d never struck him. Not once. Which wasn’t how she was raised nor close to the marital violence she’d witnessed between her own parents. But she wanted to. Oh, in that moment, she wanted to very much. “Roger, I’m speaking to you!”

He pulled down the red balled lever again, staring intently at the machine as the slots rolled. Rolled, rolled, rolled – smiling till each stopped one by one on apple, apple, apple. Apple to win and the bell goes off dropping coins into the basin below. Only he doesn’t react. Just smiles and pulls the lever again, watching the fruit roll.

“Roger?”

“Hmm?”

“Roger!?”

“Hmm?”

“Roger! Can we go to dinner now? We have reservations.”

“Huh? Okay. You go. I’ll catch up later. Go to the buffet. It’s complimentary, you know.”

“So you bloody well mentioned twenty minutes ago. But we have reservations at La Sertraline at six and I’d prefer to dine there our first night in town.”

“Right. Night. Dinner. I’ll be there,” he replied in monotone, pulling the red ball lever again and watching the slots roll.

Lily could only think, *Bloody hell?!? Who IS this man and what has he done with my Roger? Because this isn’t him! This is some half a nitwit mesmerized by some bloody stupid fruit machine!*”

“It’s called the Sinner’s Purgatory, you know. Out there in Las Vegas,” Gayle explained. “And not just sinner’s purgatory, but *THE* Sinner’s Purgatory. Cause the whole town is Sin City and you get trapped inside. Which is quite clever I think.” Gayle was Lily’s best friend and neighbor whom she’d known nearly as long as Roger. A fairly decent bird too, but a bit of a “wag” – someone who liked to gossip about things she’d heard or read in the tabloids. Or saw on those trashy tv shows.

“Really, Gayle, Sinner’s Purgatory?”

“One out of every three people out there are turned into addicts, Lily. Really, it’s a terrible place. Practically an American epidemic. I saw it on Springer – drugs, alcohol, gambling, you name it, they do it. And it turns them into zombies. I’m surprised you’d even want to go there.”

“Well, Roger wants to go on a vacation back home to the States. And this was the best way to save money.”

“Well, watch yourself out there, honey. It could happen to you. Those Vegas casinos don’t have windows or clocks so you can’t tell what bloody time it is day or night. And

they keep all the lights on so you can't tell whether it's early or late. And they pump oxygen right into the casino to get you high. So you stay dazed and gambling, but not tired, you know."

"No! I don't think so," Lily chided, "You made that last part up."

"They most certainly do! And they won't say this, but Las Vegas was specially designed by the Mafia so they could legally rob you of all your money. I know cause it actually happened to a cousin of mine. He went out there and lost his life savings and now he works as a janitor at one of them cheap casinos. Bloody sad beggar he turned out to be too – always writing, asking for money and such. All I'm saying is, you need to be careful, dear! Las Vegas swallows people up!"

Las Vegas was to be Lily's first trip to the United States. She was a *Scouser* who'd never traveled more than a dozen kilometers from hearth and home. And unlike Roger, who'd grown up in the States, hadn't experienced much of the world herself. Her world began and ended with Edge Hill in Lancaster where family and friends lived. Not to mention what she heard on the BBC and what she saw at the Bijou on Saturdays where they still showed the old classic movies. But now that her kids were grown and out on their own -- and Roger retired -- she wanted to see something of the world in person. Rome, Paris, New York. Especially Hollywood where the great movies had been made. Only Roger was ruining her first trip.

"Roger?! The restaurant is just around the corner. The concierge said we could walk there in less than ten minutes. Shall we go now?"

"I'm good, thanks. You go. Enjoy yourself." Apple, apple, apple. Win. Siren. Coins drop. Roger smiles and stares. Then pulls the lever again. Apple, apple, apple. Win. Siren. Coins. Smile. Stare. Again.

Are you trying to test me?! Lily thought. *After all that talk about our first official vacation, and all the excitement getting here, and now you act like a complete arse!?* It was Roger who'd

chosen Las Vegas even though Lily had been seeking more romantic destinations. But money, even in retirement, was still tight. They'd saved enough for one big vacation and Lily wanted to make the most of it. But Roger wanted to see America again.

"Maybe we can take a cruise," Lily suggested after discovering how much plane tickets to America cost – not to mention how much two weeks in a hotel, along with food and drink, would cost them. More than what they'd saved. "We can take one of those Silver Seas senior cruises to the Riviera. Gayle says they're wonderful. Plus they're fairly inexpensive and cater to older folk like us. We can board right here at Bootle over at Pierhead. For less than half the cost of travelling to America. Wouldn't a cruise be lovely, dear?"

"I would enjoy a cruise, I suppose," Roger replied. "But I'd rather kill two birds with one stone. If we vacation in Las Vegas, we can visit some of my cousins living out there and still enjoy a romantic getaway together. Vegas is far better than a sea cruise – they have stage shows, nice restaurants, and plenty of comfortable state rooms that cater to older folk. Not to mention we could rent a car, maybe a pink Cadillac like Elvis had, and drive over to Los Angeles where the movie studios are. We can go to United Artists' Studios and take the tour. See a few movie stars maybe. What do you say to that, dear?"

"Are they that close together?" Lily asked surprised. "Las Vegas and Los Angeles?" She thought of America as this unimaginably vast place.

"Practically next door to each other." After fifty years of marriage, Roger knew Lily too well. Knew she'd grown up watching Saturday matinees at the Odeon One Picturehouse in Lancashire and fantasized about those movies. Not to mention adored all the old movie stars like Warren Beatty and Julie Christy. Elizabeth Taylor, Robert Redford, Audrey Hepburn. Especially Sean Connery and Tipi Hedron. It was how she compensated for her difficult childhood. And what she did to entertain herself as an

adult -- between diapers and PTA meetings and the coupon clippings of a domestic mother and stay at home wife. "I'll bet we'll even get to see a few movie stars. I hear Harrison Ford is shooting another movie out there this summer."

"Oh, wouldn't that be lovely! Me having a meet with Harrison Ford! Gayle would turn green with envy!"

"Sure," Roger added.

"Okay, dear, let's go to America. Let's go to Las Vegas."

Lily went online to buy plane tickets, find a rental car, and determine what hotel to stay at. And was about to book a nice little room for herself and Roger at a small Vegas hotel just off the strip when a side offer popped up on the screen. A special deal flashing a compelling offer.

Ms. Allen, how would you like to experience the finest luxury vacation Las Vegas has to offer at extremely affordable prices? And take advantage of a once in a lifetime opportunity that will turn your next vacation into a gift of pure excitement and happiness. We here at Eden Selections are offering an all-inclusive vacation for select couples who value luxury at reasonable prices. Spaces are limited though and going fast. So click now for reservations before everything is sold out. You won't regret it. The happiest vacation you'll ever have is the one you take with Eden Selections. We're just one click away.

Normally, Lily wouldn't bother with such spam, but money was, indeed, a consideration. And she did want to experience a posh vacation once in her life. Especially at affordable prices.

Plus, Lily figured. Looking over their offer doesn't commit me to anything, right? As long as I don't sign anything, right? I can back out if I don't like what I see.

Lily clicked on the link and was diverted to a website for luxury time share condos. The offer explaining how Lily could receive a discounted luxury vacation package to

Caesar's Palace, including reduced cost on airfare tickets and a rental car, if she and a guest agreed to attend a time share presentation to be held right there at the casino within the first day of her stay. The package looked legit. And the price so reduced, Lily couldn't help but bring the deal to Roger to look over.

"Is this offer too good to be true? What do you think" Lily asked.

"Oh, it's real," Roger said surprising her. "They do this kind of thing all the time over there. Bring you out for a vacation, but only after you sit through their seminar first. Get you in the seats, give you their pitch and, *bam!*, convince you to buy a time-share condo. And sign a contract so watertight, even a duck's fart couldn't escape."

"So, it's proper then and not bollocks?" Lily confirmed.

"Well, technically it's not a scam."

"It says they'll pay for everything as long as you go to their presentation."

"Sure. They have to honor their contract agreement and pay for your vacation. As long as you attend their seminar. And like the casinos out there, their whole sales pitch is weighted in their favor. Not to mention they're really good at selling. Most people get sucked into buying even if they don't really want to. And before they know it, *boom!* They've signed a contract, made a good sized down payment and subsidized the rest through a loan granted by one of their agency's "credit unions." Most people end up paying tens of thousands of pounds for a place they'll probably only go to once in their lifetime."

"So why do people do it?"

"The illusion of happiness and the free vacation mostly. Most people believe they'll be happier if they sign."

"And that works?"

"Sure. Only, before they know it, people realize they aren't happy. And they can't

afford the cost of flying back and forth to Las Vegas to visit their condo on the dates they're authorized to do so. It's all very controlled. Before people know it, they've been saddled with a high interest loan every month they have to pay come rain or shine. For a place they can't even afford to go to anymore."

"So we shouldn't do this?"

"No, I think we should."

"But you just said it's all a trap."

"Only if you fall for their pitch and buy a time-share condo. But, if you say no and stick to your guns, they can't make you sign. Or take back the vacation. And after you leave their little sales seminar, you're free to enjoy the rest of your vacation as you see fit."

"Really? Cause Gayle says they hypnotize people out there and make them do what they want."

"No, they don't actually hypnotize people, but they do use persuasive techniques that are very similar. Except those only work with gullible people. We're not gullible people."

"Really? How do you know?"

"I had some dealings with companies like that when I was deployed with the Merchant Marines. And I learned their secrets. Not only secrets, but how to beat them."

"Really? Like what?"

"Like you don't have to stay for the entirety of their sales pitch. By law. Actually none of it. All you have to do is make an appearance at the place they arrange and check in. Once you've done that, you've satisfied the contractual agreement required by law and can then tell them to pound sand and take your leave. And they still have to honor their side of the contract. They can't take away your hotel or charge you any higher rates or anything."

“And they let you do that? Let you just walk away?”

“They don’t have a choice. It’s the law. But no, they don’t want you to. They’ll pressure you. Harass you and make you feel guilty. Threaten, even. They’ll use every trick in their arsenal to convince you to stay. Because the longer you stay, the better the odds you’ll give in and sign a contract. Which, to them, is worth more than twenty to forty thousand dollars per commission for just one signed contract. Sometimes more depending on the target audience.”

“Wow, really? That much?”

“Oh yeah. One good weekend selling time shares can net those guys a hundred thousand dollars in commissions. That’s why they do it. What’s a few cheap rooms and air flights compared to that?”

“Well, maybe we shouldn’t do it then. I don’t know if I could refuse them.”

“I think we should. I used to do this sort of thing all the time when I was a Merchant Marine. It was how we made the best of our shore leave. Caracas, Istanbul, Romania -- even a couple of times in Florida and Louisiana. We’d sign up for some fly by night company’s time share pitch, go to the presentation, sign in, say no thank you and walk out. Then enjoy the rest of our time free of charge.”

“You were able to do that?”

“Sure. I mean some of those salesmen were pretty good. Almost like magicians the way they’d show you one thing, then, poof, pull a rabbit out of their hat and get you to sign. But the boys and I got pretty good at resisting them. And even made a game of seeing who could last the longest during presentations till we finally said no and walked out. The boys and I ended up having a bunch of free vacations that way. It was great!”

“Well, if you think so.”

“I do. I’m sure I can resist one more rabbit if we go to Vegas. And the savings would be well worth it I imagine.”

“So you think we should do it then.”

“Sure! Why not? And now that I think about it, not only can we take a vacation to the States, but with the pounds saved, we can return home and go on that cruise you wanted too.”

“Oh, really Roger?! I would love that! That would be so wonderful!”

“Sure. Best of both worlds. All we have to do is be determined, tell those salesmen ‘no’ and hold on to our reasons why. After that, we’ll just leave and enjoy the rest of our vacation. Come home and go on that cruise. It’ll be great. I say we accept their offer and take advantage.”

Lily trusted Roger, figuring he was more worldly than her and knew such things far better than she. So she filled out the online forms and accepted a membership reservation for a time share pitch presentation to be held at Cesar’s Palace grand ballroom the day after they arrived.

“Watch yourself out there, darling,” Gayle worried.

“Roger and I will be fine.”

But standing in the casino, not even two hours after their arrival, all was not fine. Roger was a virtual zombie who wouldn’t leave his machine and Lily frustrated beyond belief, trying not to pull her hair out.

“Alright Roger. You win. I’ll leave you to your game.” *Let him gamble, she thought, he’s on vacation too and appears to be winning. Heck, I might even try a little gambling myself.*

But Lily didn’t feel comfortable. The casino wasn’t right somehow. It was noisy and crowded, sure, but she could handle that. Something just felt out of place. And had since they arrived. Nothing was as she’d expected. Slot machines everywhere ringing,

coins plinking, roulette tables spinning, chairs scraping the floor, and hundreds of people packed in together chattering away. Not to mention the cloying smell of cigarette smoke and stale alcohol everywhere making her feel dizzy and nauseous.

“Roger, I think I’ll go back to our room to freshen up. I think I have jet lag.”

“Sure, the buffet sounds good. I’ll meet you there later,” Roger mumbled. “I’m not hungry right now.”

“Roger please listen to me for a second. Can you stop pulling on that lever for a moment? We’re checked into room 312 upstairs. I’m going up there now. Come upstairs in a few hours and we’ll have a late dinner together? Okay?”

“Sure. Have fun. I’ll see you later.”

So frustrating! Lily turned to leave. But after taking twenty, maybe thirty steps, she realized she didn’t know where the elevators were. And when she turned around to go back to Roger, realized she didn’t know where he was anymore either. Couldn’t even see him or judge which direction he was at. Everywhere there were people and everything was confusing. She couldn’t orient herself. A few steps in this direction, a few in that and Lily realized she was completely lost. So lost, she couldn’t even tell how to get out.

“Bloody hell, this can’t be right. Excuse me, sir? Excuse me, ma’am? Can you tell me where the elevators are.” But no one would answer her. No one would even stop and acknowledge her. “Bloody hell!”

Lily panicked realizing she had no idea where to go. Or knew how to leave the casino and return to the hotel lobby or her hotel room. Her bearings were completely off and she was disoriented.

I will not cry! I will not scream! I will not lose my temper! became her mantra in the moment. Then she really looked around. And nearly lost it. Everyone, and I mean everyone, around her were repeating the same actions over and over with the same

blankly smiling stare she'd noticed on Roger. The card dealer over there kept dealing out the same cards, putting them down on the felt table then picking them back up. The dazed men and women at the slot machines were pulling on the levers over and over. The baccarat dealer, pretending to shuffle, over and over and over. The roulette wheel spinning and spinning and spinning, never stopping. A few feet away, Lily noticed a glamorous blond lady wearing a sequined red party dress, applying lipstick to her lips over and over. And a casino waitress in short skirt setting a beer down in front of a cowboy, then picking it up and setting it down again.

What is going on here? Lily wondered. Everyone was stuck in some sort of purgatory of repeat actions.

Am I having a stroke? Can jet lag do this to someone? Lily thought. *So strange. Am I going nutter?*

Lily was about to scream when a tall man wearing a tuxedo walked up to her. He wasn't stuck in any time loop. But nor was he a man either. Lily didn't know how she knew this, but the tall man was somehow not a human man. The details seemed off. And when he fixed her with his intense stare, she couldn't move. He was staring right at her, holding her in his intense gaze and gliding right up to her.

"Hello, Mrs. Avery."

"What is going on here?" Lily blurted out before she could help herself.

"It depends on your point of view actually," he replied. "For all intents and purposes, 'here' is no longer earth. Here is actually a spaceship currently leaving earth's orbit. Let's see if we can't figure out the rest together." He smiled and put out his hand – (*tentacle?*) – onto her shoulder. "I'd be honored to help you, Lily, and get you settled."

Lily passed out. Or wanted to but couldn't. The tall man wouldn't let her. He held her in his strange gaze preventing her from falling – his eyes intent and mesmerizing.

His eyes, she thought, they're not real. They're like some kind of a cross between a giant ant and a praying mantis. Or he's the devil. She could see him in her mind's eye and it scared her so bad, Lily let her bladder go and wet herself, leaving a pool of urine on the ground at her feet.

"Oh, look at that," the tall man commiserated looking down. "You've gone and soiled your britches. I wish I could say that didn't happen, but it does. I've accepted I have that effect on some people at first meet. Oh well, *C'est La Vie. Quel dommage.*"

"Who are you? *WHAT* are you? What is going on? Why am I so afraid?" Lily stammered.

"No need to be afraid, Mrs. Allen. It happens to a small percentage of our guests -- about 1%, -- but you'll feel much better when I get you situated. What game would you like to play?"

"Game? Who cares about a bloody game!?"

"We do, Mrs. Allen. It's why you're here. It was all spelled out in the contract you agreed to," the tall man replied giggling. Giggled. Actually giggled! "Once you play a game, we cover the rest of your time share membership."

"Membership? I didn't sign up for any membership. This is my first time here. I'm from the UK."

"I assure you Mrs. Allen you did. You agreed to hear us out when you booked your trip. It's all part of the package deal for you and your husband Roger. I wouldn't say otherwise if it wasn't true. You agreed to all this."

"I assure you I bloody well did not! There was no mention of playing some game that turned you into a zombie. I only agreed to listen to a sales pitch for a time share condo."

"No, not condos. But yes, time share. Your time and our time together. The game *IS* the "sales pitch." And yes, by the agreement between us, you did agree to hear us out."

“Please, I have children. I have grandchildren.” Lily wasn’t exactly sure why she said that, or what she was begging for, but it was the only thing she could think to say in the moment.

“Yes, Mrs. Allen. I am well aware. We perform our due diligence for every guest and make sure to know everything we can before you arrive. Life statistics, geographical spatiality, psychological demographics, enneagram composition. We’ve become quite good at it. Though obviously, on occasion, there are one or two guests who display higher levels of resistance levels than we expected. At least initially. That’s when we have to initiate a direct synthesis. That said, I think it’s time we start the pitch. Please select a game you’d like to play.”

“I shan’t be doing anything of the sort!” *Shan’t? Where had that come from? Why am I talking like an Elizabethan schoolmarm?* “I will NOT be playing any of your bloody stupid games,” Lily articulated clearly.

The tall man stared down at her with sour intensity over being rebuffed. *“Oh, but I assure you, you will!* It’s part of our agreed upon contract. You agreed to sit through our time share proposal in exchange for a discounted vacation. We’ve honored our end and brought you here. Now it’s time you honored yours.”

Oh, Lord. Oh, Lord. Oh my sweet Lord. Somehow Lily knew. She wouldn’t be returning home once she started playing one of their games. And if she hadn’t just released her bladder, she would’ve pissed herself all over again. “I don’t want to. Please.”

“Mrs. Allen...Lily, these games are in no way dangerous or harmful to you. Nor are they any kind of punishment. The opposite in fact. These games are designed to benefit your kind. And are really just a subliminal communication device allowing our species to talk directly to your subconscious – to offer you a very special contract between your people and ours. At no time will you lose what kind call “free will.”

Once engaged, you will still retain all your ability to accept or not after hearing our proposal."

"Which is?"

"Well, let's move to a machine and get you started so you can understand. You can experience our proposal directly for yourself."

"Why can't you just tell me? I'm going to refuse anyway."

"Like I mentioned earlier, there are one percent of your population who are resistant. But we still have to make the effort. And you are still required to attend."

"No. I'll take whatever penalty you want, but I'm not doing this. You can just let my husband and I go, cause we bloody well say no."

"Roger, as you can see, has already agreed and been engaged. I believe it's time you do as well. We're well within our rights to demand you do so." Again the tall man giggled in his Machiavellian way.

Like one of those classic movie bad guys" Lily thought. *He's practically twirling his mustache.*
"I told you I won't be playing your games! So you can just bloody well piss off!"

"Now, now, Mrs. Allen. I've been assured by our legal team we have the right to enforce our contract with you by ensuring you engage in our meeting, visa vie playing a game. It doesn't violate any of your human rights to be forced to play and you will be well cared for while you do, I assure you. I don't want you to think we are unsympathetic or being unfair. But you must play a game. Your husband Roger has already begun and see how well he's transitioned. So will you. And at the end of the week, you will have the opportunity to sign on with us for a longer stay and reap the benefits. The same is true for Roger, of course."

"What!? No! Why? None of this makes sense. You don't make any sense. This isn't even possible."

"Mrs. Allen, it's time to play. I'm not able to explain again. And, really, it is for your best interests. You will understand far better after you play."

"I'm not playing a bloody damn thing."

The tall man stopped smiling, looked to his left, and nodded. Lily felt two strong tentacles grab her arms from behind, wrap her up, and drag her to the nearest slot machine next to Roger.

"Stop, please! I'll pay you anything, *give* you anything, please, please, just let me go!"

Lily looked for the tall man to make eye contact and plead her case. But he was no longer a man. The casino was no longer a casino, and Lily could now see hundreds of humans sitting in rows in front of metal boxes pulling on red handled levers. All with blankly smiling stares on their hypnotized faces. In a metal room filled with dozens of these ant-like creatures hovering nearby, holding clip boards and watching -- monitoring the humans at their metal boxes.

"Enjoy your game, Mrs. Allen. I'll see you in a week."

Lily was forced to look at the metal device in front of her. And before she could close her eyes, felt the influence dig deep into her brain. The next thing she knew, she was reaching forward to grab the red balled lever and pull. The effect was immediate. Her eyes re-focused and she felt it – a vast blue ocean under a gentle blue sky with beautiful lights dancing in the sky and wonderfully serene music playing. All her worries faded. Nothing else mattered. Nothing else but watching the lights and listening to the music. Till it stopped and she had to reach forward to pull the lever again so the sky would once again become gentle, the ocean blue, the lights mesmerizing and the music serene. Again. And again. And again. Lily pulled the lever again. The sales pitch had begun.

The End.

