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Burning Bridges As We Go

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Author's Intro: I wanted to write a story about a couple who'd grown old together, but found themselves at odds after some fifty years of marriage. Exploring how their approach to life had changed since progressing into their senior years. The "Vegas purgatory" of the title was supposed to be synonymous with that, but somehow came out more a twilight zone-styled episodic story. Your guess is as good as mine why, psychologically speaking. I hope you enjoy the story.

Vegas Purgatory

"Roger? How much longer?" Lily asked, speaking to the back of her husband's head. A head she'd been married to for nearly forty years. "Because we have dinner reservations at six."

"Not long now," Roger replied pulling down on the red balled lever till the slots landed on apple, grape, banana. Apple, grape, banana to win and the bell goes off and coins drop. But Roger doesn't react. Just pulls the handle and watches the fruit roll again.

"Roger? Roger! Can we please go to dinner now, please? We have reservations."

"You go. I'll catch up later. Go to the buffet. It's complimentary, you know."

"So you bloody well mentioned. But we have reservations at a nice place the concierge recommended and I'd prefer dining there our first night." Lily stared at the back of her husband's head thinking, *Who the hell ARE you?!? How had he become so completely mesmerized in such a short amount of time?*

Roger only stared at the slot machine, giving off no reaction. Even when the bloody thing landed on another matching apple, grape, banana, causing the win light to go off, the win bell to sound, and coins plinking rapidly into the tray below. Roger just kept staring. Apple, grape, banana. Win. No reaction. Apple, grape, banana. Win. No reaction.

What was this? Lily thought. "Roger, didn't you just win?"

"Hmm? Busy. Catch up later," he replied still mesmerized. Oblivious.

Well, to be fair, Lily thought, I've never seen him gamble before. Could this be what happens? Him getting really caught up in the moment? Or maybe was this that "Vegas purgatory" condition Gayle had warned her to watch out for when she arrived in the States.

Lily's best friend, Gayle – who'd once visited cousins in Kansas and felt entitled to speak about America and American ways after spending an entire summer accruing some knowledge – told Lily, "You have to watch yourself out there, honey. Those Vegas hotels don't allow windows in their casinos nor clocks on the wall so you can never tell what time it is day or night. And they keep all the lights set to permanent evening so you aren't sure whether it's early or late. And they pump oxygen right into the room to get you high. So you stay dazed and gambling, but not tired, you know."

"They do not!" Lily gasped, "You made that last part up."

"They most certainly do! I saw it on Oprah. It's all designed to put you into a living stupor and keep you gambling till you lose your life savings. That happened to a cousin of mine who lived there. Lost his life savings and now he works as a janitor at some *bloody cheap casino* out there. Bloody sad beggar he turned out to be. You need to be careful, my dear, and watch yourself. Las Vegas swallows people up!"

Las Vegas was to be Lily's first trip to the United States of America. She was a *Scouser* who'd never traveled more than two dozen kilometers from hearth and home. And unlike Roger, who'd grown up south of Vegas in a tiny dustbowl town called Wheaton

Springs before joining the Merchant Marines at eighteen to travel the world, Lily herself hadn't experienced much of the world herself. Mostly friends and family and the daily cares of those living in Edge Hill. But now that the kids had been raised and Roger finally retired, she was getting a chance to see something of the world. Only Roger was ruining it.

"Roger?! The restaurant is just down the block. The concierge said we can walk there in not even ten minutes. Shall we go now?"

"I'm good, thanks. You go. Enjoy yourself." Apple, grape, banana. Win. Stare. Apple, grape, banana. Win. Stare.

Are you trying to test me?! Lily thought. After all that talk about our first official vacation, and all the excitement getting here, now you act like a complete arl arse? It was Roger who'd chosen Nevada as the place of their vacation. Lily wanted something new – maybe more romantic to make up for the honeymoon they'd never taken. But with only enough money saved for one vacation, their choices had been limited to either or. And compromises had to be made.

"Maybe we can take a cruise first," Lily suggested to Roger after discovering how much plane tickets to America and two weeks for a hotel would cost them. Far more than what they'd saved. Not to mention, car rental and food. "We can take one of those Silver Seas senior cruises to the Riviera. Gayle says they're wonderful, they're not that expensive, and they cater to older folk like us. And we can board right here at Bootle on 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 still visit my family and still enjoy a romantic getaway together. Vegas is far better than a sea cruise, my dear – they have more stage shows, more nice restaurants, and more comfortable state rooms. Not to

mention we could rent a car, maybe a pink Cadillac convertible like Elvis had, and drive with the top down through the desert all the way to Los Angeles where the movie studios are. We can go to Universal Studios like you always wanted. Take the tour and 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?"

"Practically next door, my dear."

After nearly forty years, he knew her too well. He knew she adored old movie stars whose films she'd watched at the Odeon One Picturehouse in Lancashire each week. Warren Beatty and Julie Christy. Elizabeth Taylor, Robert Redford, Audrey Hepburn. Not to mention Sean Connery and Tipi Hedron. It was how she compensated for a difficult adolescence, and what she did to entertain herself between diapers and PTA meetings and the coupon clippings of a domestic mother and stay at home wife. The idea of seeing movie stars up close and personal was a dream. She might even see Harrison Ford -- have a bit of a convo and snap a few photos. Oh, wouldn't that be lovely! And turn Gayle completely green with envy!

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

Lily went online to arrange flights, car rentals, and a hotel to stay in. And was about to book a nice looking 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, *"Ms. Allen, how would you like to experience the finest luxury vacation Cesar's Palace in Las Vegas has to offer at very affordable prices? And take advantage of a once in a lifetime opportunity to own a part of historic Las Vegas for less than one day's stay? Click on the link below and let us show you how we can turn your next vacation into one of pure happiness -- all while gaining access to this most unique opportunity. Spaces are limited and going fast. So click now for reservations before everything is sold out. You won't regret it. Happiness is just one click away."*

Normally, Lily wouldn't bother with such spam, but money was a consideration. And she did want to experience a posh vacation at least once in her life. *Plus, looking over their offer doesn't commit me to anything, right?* Lily figured. *As long as I don't sign anything, I can back out if I don't like what I see.* So Lily clicked on the link and was diverted to an American website selling luxury time-share condos. The offer explained how Lily could receive a discounted luxury vacation package to Caesar's Palace, including reduced cost on air fare tickets and a rental car during her stay, if she and a guest agreed to attend a condo time share pitch to be held right there at the casino within the first two days 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 in your estimation?" she asked.

"Oh, it's real," Roger said surprising Lily. "They do that kind of thing all the time over there. Bring you out, get you in the seats, give their pitch and convince you to buy a time-share condo. And sign a contract so tight, even a duck's fart won't escape."

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

"Well, it's technically not a scam, so to speak. They do have to honor their agreement with you if you accept their terms of agreement. But they aren't exactly playing fair either. The whole sales pitch is weighted in their favor to the point most people get sucked into buying a time share even if they don't really want to. And before they know it, they've signed the contract, made a small down payment, subsidized the rest through one of the agency's "credit unions," and end up paying tens of thousands for a condo they'll probably only use once. Maybe twice. But it'll never be enough to justify the expense."

"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. Or if they don't sign, they intend to sit through whatever sales

pitch is thrown their way, say no thank you, and go off and enjoy the rest of their discounted vacation.”

“And that works?”

“Only if they say no and stick to their guns. The organizers can’t make you sign. Or take back the discounted offer once terms have been agreed to – which is that you’ll attend their sales pitch conference. Nothing else. But they also know most people can be swayed once their butts hit the seat and the sales pitch starts. They end up buying despite any reservation. Which these salespeople know all too well. They’re really good at their jobs and know the psychology of a sale cold. Tapping into most people’s innermost desires, whatever that may be, till that person is convinced buying a time share condo from them is not only the right thing to do, but the only path to their happiness. Then they sign on the dotted line so fast, they barely realize what they’ve just committed themselves too. Almost like they’ve been hypnotized.”

“Is that how they do it? Through mind manipulation? I want the discount, but I don’t want to be hypnotized or anything like that.”

“No, they don’t actually hypnotize people. But they do use techniques very similar. Only I happen to know something all those other gullible people don’t.”

“What?”

“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 and time they arrange and check in. Once you’ve done that, you’ve satisfied the agreement requirements by law and can then tell them to pound sand, say goodbye, and take your leave any time you want. And they still have to honor the discounts.”

“And they let you do that?”

“They don’t have a choice. It’s the law. Oh, they don’t want you to. They’ll pressure you when you try to leave. Harass you and make you feel guilty -- cajole you, threaten

you, that sort of thing. They'll use just about any and every trick in their arsenal to convince you to stay through the sales pitch. Because the longer you stay, they know, the better the odds your resistance will fade and you'll sign a contract. Which, to them, is worth around twenty to forty thousand dollars in commission per 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 hundreds of thousands of dollars in commission and profit. That's why they do it. What's comping a few cheap rooms and air flights by comparison?"

"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 used to make 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, walk out, and 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 couple dozen no cost 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, we not only can take a vacation to the States this way, 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 knew America and American gimmicks far better than she. So she filled out the online forms for their discount vacation package to Las Vegas and accepted a membership reservation for a time share pitch presentation to be held in one of Cesar’s Palace grand ballrooms on the day after their arrival.

“Watch yourself out there, darling,” Gayle cajoled when Lily told her of their vacation plans. “America may be the land of opportunity, but they don’t call Las Vegas ‘sin city’ for nothing. All that pish posh about what happens in Vegas staying in Vegas indeed. Americans are such plonkers with their excess. Hillbilly rich is what my cousins used to call it when someone had money, but was a real git about it.”

“I think Roger and I will be fine.”

At first, they were. Roger and Lily’s vacation started out like a dream. They landed at Harry Reid International airport an hour ahead of schedule and were the first to de-plane. They were shuttled to their rental car service without delay and, once there, a very polite young lady upgraded their rental to a very posh Cadillac Escalade at no extra cost. Roger was in good spirits and his hip causing no trouble, so he loaded their bags in the back before hustling around to hold the passenger door open for her. And even gave Lily’s hand a kiss like a princess as he helped her climb in. The drive to

Cesar's Palace from the airport went smoothly and amazed Lily with buildings the like she'd never seen in person – Parisian spires and Egyptian pyramids and Venetian canals. *You can practically see the seven wonders of the world from one spot*, she marveled. Once they arrived to Cesar's Palace, Roger and Lily were treated very poshly – uniformed Valet's met them at their vehicle, a uniformed Bellhop unloaded their luggage and took it inside, and a very nice young lady met them at the front foyer and escorted them into the hotel and up to the check in counter.

Lily felt very important. "Do they do this for everyone?" she asked Roger.

"Only the posh ones," Roger laughed, the casino entrance across the lobby, so full of lights and sounds, catching his attention.

"I think I'm going to talk to the concierge before going up to our rooms," Lily advised Roger. "See what kind of shows are available and make our dinner reservations for tonight. How does a nice romantic dinner sound, dear? Maybe one of those fancy steak houses you've always wanted to try?"

"Sounds good. While you do that, I think I'll head over to the casino and try one of those slot machines," Roger mentioned. "I'd like to see what all the fuss is about. And I'm feeling nice and lucky right now -- maybe I'll hit the jackpot and we'll go home millionaires."

"That'd be nice. Okay, dear, have fun. See you shortly," was the last thing Lily said to Roger before he headed off to the casino. "Will do," was the last thing she remembered him saying in reply. Till an hour later when he hadn't returned and she hadn't heard from him.

Lily went looking for Roger on the casino floor, finding him seated nearly on the other side in front of a slot machine called "Carmen Miranda Spins." And behaving like a zombie. Pull the lever. Watch the fruit roll till apple, grape, banana. Lights, siren, coins plinking. Stare straight ahead. Grab the handle and spin again.

“Alright Roger, I’ll leave you to your game for a while.” Despite her exasperation, Lily decided to cut Roger some slack. He was on vacation too after all. And he had been a good man and husband to her taking her on this trip. *Let him gamble*, she thought, *he’s earned it. Heck, I might even try a little myself.*

But Lily didn’t feel comfortable. The casino was noisy and crowded. And with Roger in the throes of his “Vegas purgatory,” she felt lonely and out of place. Slot machines kept ringing, coins plinking, roulette tables spinning, chairs scrapping the floor, and hundreds of people packed in together around the games. Not to mention the cloying smell of cigarette smoke everywhere making her feel dizzy and nauseous.

“Roger, I think I’m going to go up to our room and rest for a while. I think the jet lag is starting to set in. How about you? Do you feel okay?”

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

“Roger please listen to me. Can you stop pulling on that bar for a moment? We’re all checked in to room 312. I’m going up there now. Will you be joining me?”

“Sure. Have fun. I’ll see you later.” He was strangely monotone. Eyes staring at the machine. Oblivious.

Lily felt even more aggravation. And she couldn’t say why, but for some reason she was having the oddest sensation of insecurity. Roger didn’t look right – too pale and comatose – and too oblivious. Not to mention a very uncomfortable sort of awkwardness washing over her for being in a new place she wasn’t accustomed to -- realizing she didn’t know a single other person or even the customs and expectations. She was more than five thousand miles from home, standing in an American casino in a strange land she knew almost nothing about.

“I’m leaving now, Roger. I’m heading up to the room to call the girls and let them know we landed safe. They’ll be worried till I do.”

But when she turned to leave, Lily panicked realizing she had lost her sense of direction and had no idea where to go. Or how to leave the casino and return to the hotel lobby. Her bearings were completely off. Lily looked around for help, but this only made her more confused. She noticed, despite all the people, no one was doing anything. Or they were, but it looked unreal. The people around her were repeating the same actions over and over with the same blank stare she'd noticed on Roger. The card dealer over there kept dealing out the same cards, putting them down on the felt table. The dazed men and women sitting in front of him picking them up and putting them back down without looking. The dealer collecting them, pretending to shuffle, and then putting them down again. A few feet from them, Lily noticed a very glamorous blond lady wearing a sparkly, sequined red dress, standing in the aisle who kept taking lipstick out of her purse, applying it, re-capping the lipstick and putting it back in her purse. Only to repeat the process, taking the lipstick out again, re-applying, and putting it away. Oh and look! Over there was a casino waitress in short skirt setting a beer down in front of a cowboy at the roulette table. She'd set the beer down in front of him, he'd pick it up, pretend to drink, and set it down again.

What is going on here? Lily wondered.

Dozens of people sat at slot machines all around her, staring ahead blankly at their machines, pulling on the levers. Just like Roger. All dazed and in their Vegas purgatory. The same for everyone she could see in the casino -- people in their little worlds, staring blankly and performing the same actions over and over with that bloody comatose look on their face. Like they were stuck in a time loop.

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

Lily was about to scream when her attention was captured by a tall man wearing a tuxedo who was walking toward her. He wasn't stuck in any time loop. But nor was

he a real man either. Lily didn't know how she knew this, but the tall man walking toward her somehow was not a human man. The details seemed off somehow.

But she couldn't move either. He was staring right at her, holding her in his intense gaze and gliding right up to her.

"What is going on here?" Lily blurted 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, but 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 fill you in, Lily, and get you settled."

Lily passed out. Or she 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 fractured.

His eyes, she thought, they're not real. They're like some kind of a cross between a giant ant and praying mantis. He's like some cross between an ant and a giant praying mantis. She could see him in her mind's eye and it scared her so bad, she let her bladder go and wet herself down both legs till a pool formed on the ground beneath 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% -- who aren't immediately drawn into a game. But you'll feel much better when you do."

"A game? A 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 time share condos."

"Not condos. But yes, time share. Your time and ours together. The game IS your so called "sales pitch." And yes, by the agreement between us, you did agree to hear us out. Well, that's what the game does. Introduces you to our time share contract. You wouldn't be here if you hadn't agreed, even by proxy."

"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 of in the moment.

"Yes, Mrs. Allen. I am 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. Though obviously we didn't recognize your higher resistance levels to initial game attraction. It happens, like I mentioned earlier, to one percent of your population – generally those who haven't experienced much life diversity. No offense. Someone obviously dropped the ball on that one. But *C'est La Vie. Quel dommage*. Nobody's perfect. 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? Shan't indeed!* "I will NOT be playing any of your bloody stupid games," Lily articulated clearly.

The tall man stared down at her 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 of it. Now it's time you honored yours."

Oh, Lord. Oh, Lord. Oh my sweet Lord. Somehow Lily knew. She wouldn't be returning once she started playing one of the games. And if she hadn't just released her bladder, she could've pissed herself all over again. "I don't want to. Please."

"Mrs. Allen, 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 salespeople to talk directly to your subconscious – to offer you a very special time share agreement between your species and ours. At no time will you lose your so called human free will. Once engaged, you will still retain all your ability to accept or not once you've heard our proposal."

"Which is?"

"Well, let's move to a machine and get you started. 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 the "sales pitch" as you call it."

"No. I'll take whatever penalty you want, but I'm not doing this. You can just let me and Roger 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, 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 once your contract has concluded. The same is true for Roger, of course.”

“What!? No! Why? None of this makes sense. You don’t make any sense.”

“Mrs. Allen, it’s time to play. I’m not able to explain much more otherwise. 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 blank stares on their hypnotic faces. In a metal room filled with dozens of these ant-like

creatures hovering and holding clip boards -- 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 saw – 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.