

Cassandra's Keeper

Even for Cassandra, it was hard not to stare. The diminutive man appeared to be the consummate outcast. His ghoulish face, scarred with burns and deep gashes, exuded misery. Perched on his flattened nose, a thick, bent pair of glasses only accentuated a pumpkin-shaped head which seemed to present a different shaped swell for either side of it.

Rain fell steadily that first night she encountered him--the eve of Thanksgiving in 1954. Her family was off to Grandma Emma's house for their first of three wonderful feasts in the coming forty-eight hours.

Packed into their maize and cream 1953 Chevy, the kids were chipper about the meals and the four days off from school. There were four siblings: Randy, aged nine, an adventuresome 3rd grader who loved baseball, dogs, and food; Margaret, aged ten, a pert, petite brunette who craved school and teasing her brother; Phyllis, eleven, a bespectacled, shy dishwater blonde who cherished privacy; and Cassandra, also brunette, and the eldest. An unusually tall and somewhat bossy preteen mature well beyond her dozen years, Cassandra, as in most family matters, felt above it all and these sorts of trips, which though eagerly awaited, always tried her patience.

Their home was just north of Iroquois Park on the south side of Louisville, Kentucky. Mrs. Packer taught grade school at the same school the kids attended, though she was not allowed to have them in her class. And Herb Packer worked as chief engineer & head of maintenance at St Joseph's Hospital.

As the family slowed for a railroad crossing, Randy suddenly fired a wadded up White Castle hamburger box at Phyllis, who was trying to read. "Daggone, you," she yelled. "You stupid brat."

"Randy do that again," Cassandra said, "and you will be a very sorry boy by the time we get there."

"Ahh, try it, Cassie," Randy replied, knowing Cassandra hated any nickname for Cassandra.

"Randy's actually a girl's name, you know," she replied.

"All right, you all," Janet Packer interjected half-heatedly, for she was impressed and grateful for Cassandra's assumptive command and did not wish to overrule her.

"Goodness," exclaimed Cassandra as she suddenly noticed the man at the railroad crossing. "Oh Dear God, what happened to him?"

Wearing a baseball cap the man was drenched. It appeared obvious that he was employed by the railroad for the giant rail yard was not far away. A tiny shack, dimly lit, near the crossing was perhaps his shelter or work station, Cassandra thought. The man appeared frustrated as he worked painstakingly with a burly wrench on the gate which had not gone down, though the crossing lights alternated their brilliant crimson as a freight train lazily trudged past. Every so often the man glanced woefully at the halted line of cars.

"Oh my," said Mrs. Packer taken aback by the worker's appearance, then trying to change the subject, "Randy, a drumstick and all the dressing you can eat is coming up and I believe Aunt Anne is bringing a pumpkin pie from Von Stauf's Bakery."

"Gads, that guy is ugly," Randy said ignoring his mother. "Is he supposed to be the Lionel guy in the shack? You know the guy that comes out when the train goes by at home?"

“He’s not the man that comes out of the little plastic house in an electric train set,”

Cassandra said, obviously hoping her mother would re-assert herself also. But their dad laughed and said, “He is the same guy, or, I should say, the same job only for real.”

“But the guy in the shack isn’t ugly,” Randy said. “Real plain, but not--”

“Now, Randy, stop, please.” Mrs Packer said.

In minutes the caboose rambled past and as their car traversed the tracks, Cassandra gazed openly into the man’s face. There was an impression of hopelessness, loneliness, but Cassandra could not escape the fact that the man scared her too. Too creepy to be a decent human being, she caught herself thinking. No, she muttered, I should not have thought that.

There was little doubt that evening that the worker was new but in coming weeks they realized he must be a permanent employee for the railroad for every time in the coming months that the family jaunted to Grandma Emma’s, usually a weekly occurrence, they encountered this dejected-appearing soul. Was he, some addendum to railroad procedures and crew because the crossing had been the scene of several accidents? Mr. Packer had speculated that possibility out loud near Christmas.

Years passed, their visits to their favorite grandmother continued by the same route even after the expressway which included Interstate 65, was completed. Mr. Packer was a person of habit.

Once, perhaps three years after their first sighting of the dismal fellow, Mr. Packer announced that he had heard from old Tom Barkman, a senior Louisville & Nashville Line Employee, that the man’s name was Humphrey Cavandish. And that as an eighteen-year-old draftee, Private Cavendish, had been badly wounded by an artillery shell in the Korean War. He

had just taken a job with L&N before his drafting, and, per their policy, he had a job waiting upon his return and partial, at best, recovery.

Perhaps because that first night she had offered objection to their childish cruelty, even into her teens her siblings teased Cassandra about the "Lionel Station Man." Though they'd changed and somewhat lightened their volume and the meanness of their comments to ones such as "Cassandra's boyfriend;" or "Cassandra, when's the wedding?" or "Cassandra, I hope the kids look like him and not you."

It may have all been in childish fun, but sometimes Cassandra could not help but think the man may have been blessed, or cursed, with exceptional hearing and possibly had caught some of the blather during the times their windows were down in the spring and summer and they were stopped at the tracks. Sometimes it haunted her that he sensed their making fun of him; he had to have, she thought. And more times than she could remember she would hiss at them, "My God, he can hear you! How mean, how terrible, are all of you!"

Life moved on, in 1968, Cassandra graduated from the University of Kentucky Law School and passed the bar in her home state. She worked in Lexington and in 1970 she married, but sadly, her husband was killed in Vietnam leaving her with a one-year-old daughter. She never remarried but did fall deeply in love with a former Kentucky State Senator in 1985. She met him and part of their initial attraction was that, despite her maiden name, they were both *insane* Chicago Bears' fans.

In 1990, she was back in Louisville for an important court date. By then she was the managing partner of her firm and the case was significant for them. She had to be at the courthouse at 6th and Broadway at 10 A.M. but she knew only too well that the traffic going north on the I-65 Expressway would be thick and only oozing because of the construction.

Her mind whirring and angry from a delayed fax from her team back in Lexington, she decided to take alternate roads that included part of the old back way to Grandma Emma's house, then take Central to Third Street and proceed north to Broadway before turning west. "Yes," she said aloud, "It pays to be a native when the main route has turned to a joke." She smiled realizing that only she, amongst all those in her firm would have this option. She confidently accelerated her white Lincoln along Woodlawn Avenue.

A feeling of eeriness suddenly seized her as she approached the old crossing. It looked surprisingly similar, perhaps more modern but still off-the-beaten-path-appearing, rundown, even forsaken.

Reaching the tracks she noticed a Louisville and Nashville diesel locomotive had stopped and though the crossing lights blinked, the gate was not down. A Union Pacific engine slowly approached from the other direction pulling no cars. The gate remained up, and judging from the speed of the U P engine, Cassandra knew she could easily make it once that single engine passed, as it would take several seconds for the other train, a long one, to generate any speed at all, and, she needed to get to Sixth and Broadway.

The lone engine rumbled past and Cassandra gunned the Lincoln. The sitting train's horn suddenly blared and Cassandra, knowing she was doing wrong, but knowing also that she was in no danger, cursed the engineer and proceeded.

Except the crossing had three tracks.

Coming at forty-five miles per hour on the third track, hidden by the parked train, was another freight. The black locomotive, its horn blaring, was the last thing Cassandra would remember about her horror-filled second. Instinctively, she tried a u-turn but it was too late to avoid the collision. She managed to get the car turned nearly one-hundred eighty degrees but its

rear end, fully across the inner rail of the third set of tracks, was impacted by the train. Her head smashed into the roof of her car and she was instantly knocked unconscious amidst a scene filled with grinding, crunching, shattering glass, squealing brakes, air horns, and even screams from other vehicles. Seconds later, a full two hundred yards from the crossing, the Lincoln's gas tank exploded. Almost simultaneously, the car lurched free from the train and wedged into a small abutment at the side of the tracks.

When Cassandra regained consciousness she was in extreme pain and fading into then out of shock. Her legs were burned and though she could move her extremities she could not get up. She wondered how she'd gotten where she was, lying on the ground, her head pulsing.

There was roiling fire and heavy black smoke now some sixty yards from where she lay. She saw a face, one of deep concern, which seemed familiar. She strained to focus on the man kneeling over her and putting something soft between her head and the rocks beneath her. The face was old, with the mouth curling down, and there were worn scars.

"I know you. You, you, have worked here for years." she managed.

"Cassandra," he said with a slight smile. "You're little Cassandra."

"Yeah, how do--"

"I remember the beauty mark and you, the kind girl and her joking, happy, family." he said. "You used to stick up for me. You are going to be all right. The ambulance is here."

Then there was another voice, one much angrier. "My God, woman! Idiot lady! What the hell were you thinking? We never saw you! We couldn't stop no matter if we had!"

"Please," the old switchman said, "she's hurt."

"I'm sorry," Cassandra said, "I didn't see you either. I thought it was safe. Is anyone, anyone else..."

“No, just you. And if it hadn't been for the trackman here, pulling you from your car, you'd still be in it. Burned to hell, cremated, by now!”

“I'm so sorry, so very sorry,” she said faintly as paramedics loaded her onto a stretcher.

“My God—th-thank you so much,” she gasped to her rescuer.

Just before the medics hoisted her, the hunched switchman reached over and took her hand. “Cassandra,” he said with his face suddenly, actually, alight, “my old friend who I remember so well, my defender, Cassandra. Everything is going to be all right.”

End