

Flight

by Tabatha Stirling

How did I find myself here? On this train with my baby daughter asleep beside me. Fleeing in a stark, dark night from my husband and brother who would take her from me.

It could happen to anyone. A wrong act here, an odd deed there. A slice of paranoia, the mention of poor mental health and you could be here too.

The sun is setting on Scotland as my train follows the coastal route towards Kings Cross and London. For once, the proud Northern sea is a brilliant cobalt, the algae collecting towards the surface sun - shimmer on a promise from Neptune. The sky looks hopeful and every mile that I put between my pursuers and myself is for the better. If they catch me — all will be lost.

I gave birth to my baby only days ago. We are both newborn. Her with life and me with betrayal. It seems a lifetime has cantered between now and then. The birth of my daughter and the death of my marriage.

All the vaudeville villains are in place. The evil brother, the malicious sister-in-law, the panicked husband. The mad, bad wife.

Everybody is very angry with me. I have lain in my hospital bed, the stitches pinching & bucking at every movement and nobody contacted me for days. I felt safe for a while until they spoke of taking my Rosebud to Canada to live with my brother and his hard, bitch wife. Xervantaz would like her very much. There is nothing more that he enjoys than feeding of the extremes of human nature. Whether it is innocence or vitriol, he delights in the polar aspects of our extraordinary condition. He covets it, desires it and it is a demon's one source of weakness. Unlike our souls that are two a penny — it is our empathy that the invisible demonic circus really aches for.

Leaning back against the couchette, the palm of my hand laid gently on my daughter's stomach, I am reminded of better days. Of cowslips, fresh lemonade and lavender days. The hum of bees succumbing to nectar and the memory of honeyed white wine. When the panicked husband cherished the mad, bad wife and I was everything to him. But how things change in the blink of a jaundiced eye.

You see, I lost the money. A lot of money. Hundreds of thousands of pounds spent on shoes, holidays, friends in need and other things over five, turbulent and sucked dry years. And we are utterly broke now. Stripped down to the very reeds. No more holidays and shoes and helping friends. No more stays in luxury hotels. No more looks of pride from my husband as I choose a delicious burgundy from a sumptuous wine list or the chateau briand just because I could. No more name dropping or boastful conversations for my husband. Just the legacy of a wasteful, mad, bad wife who lost control and used spending as a comfort.

The sun is dropping fast now in the sky and I take an exceptional solace in the shadows that ink themselves onto shore and sea. The next twelve hours are crucial. We have to disappear from the real world and hide in the twilight for safety.

Our carriage is of the old-fashioned type with tatty doors that slide open onto the corridor and carpets of muddy green. Grey blinds are pulled all the way down the windows to protect our privacy.

I think I feel a tiny movement from the baby so I lay her down beside me and give her some room to kick and gurgle. My little Rosebud. So tiny and so beautiful. The light in our carriage begins to flicker as we approach the Braid Tunnel. I rummage in my bag for something to eat because breast-feeding makes me ravenous but there isn't much. Just a quarter packet of fruit shortcake biscuits, some cheddar, half a baguette and two apples. I have no money to buy anything else so this will have to do until we reach a place of greater safety.

As I take the first bite of the red apple, it's sweet juices souring my mouth with hope, the carriage plunges into darkness and the stink of sulphur fills our tiny space. I reach for baby and hold her close — not a murmur from her; she is such a good girl.

I know what to expect because this has happened before. The darkness, the stench of an unlit match, The leathery sound of old wings flapping and finally that voice made up of feces and dust, ancient and terrible suggesting depravity and painful deaths to me.

I raise my eyes and like old, clotting blood, the demon sits smugly, wings spread wide, pooling its evil before me. It's forked tongue of copper flicks and lashes towards my face and takes time with the tasting. Xerventaz has always loved my taste. He says I am like honey ice cream with a center of decay and cunts.

There's no point closing my eyes to wish him away because he will go when he's ready. These are just primary volleys until he gets into his stride. My daughter stirs and I will her to keep still. Her baby blanket is the colour of lavender and her innocence will smell too delicious for me to hide her for long.

Xerventaz has always loved babies.

'Lily, Lily', he whispers. 'Liver, Lilo, Lovage, Lily, Lambkin, Lingus'. I shake my head as images swarm, unwanted, into my consciousness. Terrible pictures of my Rosebud and what I might do to her in the future. Of what *he* might do.

And then, like quicksilver disappearing into the veins of a sallow-skinned addict, the train emerges from the tunnel and all that is left of my calling demon is a mound of maggots and mulch; earthy with mid-notes of death.

I let out a breath that is long and labored without the sweetness of relief. A jagged breath that constricts my lungs with tar and feathers. The mad, bad wife and her Rosebud.

Absinthe green flashes puncture the sky outside — this is Xerventaz and his curiously tender farewells.

The train begins to slow as we approach Newcastle and this makes my heart flutter like a tricolor flag at the site of Madame

Guillotine. Rosebud and I are not nearly far enough away yet for my mind to cease scampering in panic.

My baby feels cold so I push her gently down my opened blouse to keep her warm. I think I hear a gurgle of contentment but the tannoy is blaring out details of the stops and stations between here and London. I see no sign of the demon which, suggests he has others to torment and slowly strangle with fear.

Then a blue light flashes in my peripheral vision and I lean over as much as I dare to see what's happening. Policemen are marching hard towards the train. I rub my forehead, jittery and unsure of what to do next. And then I see them. The evil brother & the panicked husband striding purposefully towards me and I know its over. For me and for my Rosebud.

My husband catches sight of me before I have time to duck back behind the window. I hear him shout, 'There!' and the footsteps get louder and harder as they pound the platform. I pull the baby towards me and breathe in as much as I can of her. These last moments will mean everything in the days to come when I am committed or worse. Held against my will in the evil brother's attic or in the cellar of panicked husband's house.

I kiss my daughter tenderly and wait for chaos to descend. And when it does and she is wrenched from me, an oddly formed calm descends. Even the impact of my husband's palm smacking off my cheek hardly warrants a twitch. I am pulled roughly to my feet, hands wrenched behind my back and manacled quickly. '*What have you done? What have you done?*', I hear my husband roar and his battle cry of grief screams its way through the ether towards me.

My Rosebud is safe from them forever. Still and pale as alabaster, her tiny blue lips, perfect for all time.

And I smile with this knowledge tucked deep in my heart.

And my demon Xerventaz smiles back from whatever Hell he resides in

The balance is restored between our worlds.

