

Necessary Madness Chapter Three

By Jenn Crowell

Those first few weeks after Bill's death, I expected to wake up each morning and find the windows smashed, our bedroom walls gutted, the whole city lost in the senseless echo of grief's reverberation. Instead I found only myself, curled up under a fortress of blankets, shivering, in the middle of the mattress.

When Bill had been in the hospital, I'd risen before my alarm every day, jittery with expectation and false hope, pacing barefoot on the cold floor in the gray hush of dawn before I went into the kitchen and gulped countless cups of black coffee while I made French toast for a still-slumbering Curran. Now, however, my drowse-heavy hand reached out by reflex to press the clock's snooze button two or three times as I dove back down into turbid oceans of sleep, awash in dreams of a shoulder to bury my face in, a body to coil around, until I felt small fingers shaking me, a small voice calling into the depths, Mum, you must wake up -- Curran's fingers, Curran's voice, urgent, scared, sweet.

I could hear him slamming cupboard doors and opening and closing refrigerator drawers in the kitchen as I hurriedly yanked on my nylons, and learned to expect his yell of "I'm making you breakfast!" while I bent in front of the mirror, still blurry-eyed, to put on my lipstick. I'd come out to find him already dressed for school, hair better-combed than mine, homework and books already in his knapsack on the floor, a plate of buttered toast and a cup of amaretto, with cream and sugar, awaiting me on the table. "Since when did you learn to make coffee?" I asked, yawning.

"Last week. Your lipstick is on crooked."

I swiped at it with the side of my hand.

"Other side. There. It's brilliant now."

He reminded me so much of Bill. I sat down at the table and picked at the toast. "I'm not that hungry," I said. "Here, take some of it."

"No," he said, shaking his head. "I ate already, and besides, you're getting dead skinny, Mum. You should eat more."

I smiled absently. Slumped there, I felt like a passive verb. A child.

"What time is it?" I asked.

"Time to leave," he said. "I called Mrs. Romdourl downstairs. She said I can go to school with Raj."

He slung his knapsack over his shoulder and headed for the door, both terribly small yet terribly wise in his navy-blue sweater. A shot of longing tore through me.

"Hold on a minute, love," I said.

He turned. "I need to go. We get demerits if we're late for morning assembly."

Before I'd always had to scream down the hall at him to get him out the door. Quit poking around, or you'll be in trouble! Bill would lope into the kitchen in his old faded robe, just up, and kiss me on the side of the neck, his mouth imprecise with half-sleep. "A few demerits never hurt anyone, love. I had plenty."

I held out my arms. "Not enough time for a hug goodbye, at least?"

He ran over, embraced me hard. I closed my eyes, whole again, right again. "You've got a button missing on the back of your dress," he said tenderly.

"Don't worry about it," I said. "Go on."

The door banged closed behind him. I felt down my spine, found a spot of unadorned wool, rested my head on the table. I was already twenty minutes late for work. And he was right.

I taught English at a comprehensive school just outside of London. I'd stumbled upon my career guided by echoes and a sense of defiance; I'd seen too much of my mother's artistry wasted to want to emulate her, and chemistry was out of the question once I got old enough to debunk the farfetched magic of my father's theories. English, therefore, had seemed a viable choice for me in college, a sort of middle ground where articulateness and freakishness, finally, wouldn't be branded one and the same. The last thing I wanted was to become a floaty, surreal muse infatuated with language (my father's dream daughter), or a useless pedant bulldozing tight-faced through Bahktin (my mother's object of contempt), so I'd been elated when I'd gotten the rather pragmatic job offer seven years earlier. I had summers free, got to banish the word polyglossia from my vocabulary, and learned incredible patience on the days I wanted to strangle every sullen fourteen-year-old who sat down in my classroom and proclaimed each work we studied "a bunch of bloody rot."

Their lack of decorum aside, most of my students and I got along well. They complained about my tough grading, but loved it when, on dreary winter mornings when none of us were in the mood for Chaucer, I let them lounge on top of their desks and just talk. "Listen, you guys," I'd tease the ones with the nose rings, "I was around for the real revolution."

They'd gasp and fight to defend their cherished quasi-individuality. "No, you weren't," they'd say, eying my suede heels and Marks and Sparks sweater with such suspicion that the next day I brought in a picture of myself at fifteen. The room rang with their howls of laughter at

my rags and dyed hair and black lipstick, but after that, they bitched about their essay scores a lot less and paid attention to my lectures a lot more.

During the long ordeal with Bill, they'd displayed a gritty compassion of which I'd never thought adolescents were capable. They never commented on the way my hands shook while I handed back papers or the tremble in my voice when I read off that night's list of reading assignments after I'd gotten a call from the hospital. They asked about Bill often, with refreshing bluntness oddly similar to that of my son: "Your husband, has he got better yet?"

"Not yet."

Wicked yet shy smiles. "Well, once he does we're throwing you a party."

"God help us that day," I'd say, broken inside, laughing.

Now, though, once they'd seen me come back a week late from Christmas break, hollow-eyed with exhaustion and ten pounds thinner, once they knew there wouldn't be any wild celebration, they were different. They still made their usual boisterous room-entering noises, and rolled their eyes at announcements of what to them were disgustingly early paper-topic deadlines, but they never joked anymore, never begged for a "telling Chaucer to bugger off" session, as they'd referred to them when they thought I was out of earshot. Instead they concentrated on my lectures with a control so rigid it was eerie, and when they worked together in groups they actually whispered and kept on task as opposed to engaging in loud discussions of who pulled who on the secondary-school circuit the previous weekend.

Had this transformation been under other circumstances, I would have been delighted, but now I saw it as a subtle betrayal of trust, a terrible foray into the twisted world of adult social graces, as if, like Curran in his grandmother's kitchen, they had been advised to tread lightly with me, Mrs. Burgess the barmy, the literature instructor gone unhinged. Countless times when I wrote assignments on the blackboard or leaned over to read a student's introductory paragraph, I longed to whirl, to grab their gritty tough-but-innocent shoulders, to cry out in a strangled, intense wail, "I'm me, I'm still the hardnosed-grader with the punk stories, still the one who can make you laugh and piss you off when I take off points off for spelling, and we can still tell Chaucer to bugger off occasionally, I'm the same, grief hasn't transmuted me, don't you see?"

But sometimes I had trouble believing.

At night, taking the tube home, huddled inside my coat, I bit my fingernails to shreds and watched ubiquitous blond girls in leather jackets hop on and off at stations, their bodies thin as mine but glowing, gliding effortlessly through the dull metal of the sliding doors while mine shivered, spluttered its refrain of cold, winter, loss, there is no escape. The blooming flowers of Northern Line graphite swam before my eyes, their red-and-blue swirls reminding me of the bouquets in mid-wilt all over my living room, my dining room, my kitchen, and with them the people I had to thank for their kindnesses, their saccharine words, their carnations.

I tipped my head back. The world roared past me in the darkness. In my mind I gave myself instructions in much the same way as the silky, disembodied voices on the tube platforms gently chastise all passengers to mind the gap and cheerfully announce that the next station is St. Pancras.

When the signs on the wall slow down enough to be read, when they stare at you, endlessly repeating ANGEL ANGEL ANGEL, that piercing word he was, you'll get up, you'll shove your way out, you'll mind the gap, you'll ride the escalator up to the turnstile in the slick brightness, your eyes will mist but you'll blink, pretend to read the ads for Harvey Nic's, Dillons, the Tate's latest international exhibit, oh Jesus that one will hurt but you'll keep on moving, you'll shove the card in the slot, watch it pop up, no wavering here, and then out into the open, into the murderousness of winter, you'll walk towards Upper Street, you will ignore the rosy-cheeked families of three, four, sometimes five but not often, not usually two, not ever two, you will look past the wool-sweatered husbands and their trenchcoated wives who don't deserve them, you will grit your teeth if you have to and turn onto the side street that is yours, make your way up to the walk that is yours, to 10a Theberton, the round green door and frozen emptywindowbox, slick streets and streetlamps aglow, it is like you dreamed it when you were twenty, it is like you dreamed it but with a piece cut out, oh Jesus this will hurt but you go up the front steps, you take the stairs two at a time, you are shivering, you want warmth, you want arms and fingers and voices and mouths to surround you, you're crying, you let yourself in, into 10a, you have minded all the gaps and watched for rapidly closing doors which when obstructed, you know, are dangerous, and you are home but you are alone, the flat is a mess, there are too many flowers, too much fecundity in the face of this barren hour of five o'clock, but you'll wave to your son when he barrels in, you'll smile through the wet mask of tears that has covered your face, you'll come inside. And I did.

In the evenings, after I had crouched on the edge of the bed and cried for what felt like the ten millionth time, after I'd peeled out of my stockings and dress and yanked off my earrings, I crawled into the bathroom's old claw-footed tub and soaked in water so hot it verged on painful.

There in the ragged comfort of walls' peeling paint and the half-glow of dim lightbulbs which shrouded the mirror, my shivers dissipated as my hair fanned out around me. As the water grew tepid, I thought briefly of winter afternoons stark with magic when, young, absorbed, I'd scrubbed the splashes of paint and turpentine from Bill's neck and shoulders in the same porcelain tub; he got so involved when he painted, with his whole body practically, his lack of inhibition both hysterically funny and admirable to watch. "God, you're a mess," I said. "How do you get like this?"

He pretended not to hear me. "Something a lot of artists don't understand," he said, "is the basic concept of ephemerality."

"As a limitation?" I asked, running a hand gently through his hair. A cascade of green paint flecks rained down. "Most attractive, love."

He grinned. "As a limitation, yeah, but also as progress. Part of doing anything creative is learning when to trash it. When to let go. Being able to work on something for five, ten years and then smashing it to bits because it doesn't work, because it's stale now, and then assimilating the dead good aspects . . . that's progress."

Ephemerality. I had to laugh now, thinking about how naively I'd slid closer to him, rested my cheek against his soapy shoulder blades, and thought, Screw the ephemeral, screw progress. I will never let go of this.

Eventually I would hear the loud door slam that was Curran coming upstairs from his friend Raj's (he had his own key now, now that I couldn't always be trusted to wake up and get home on time and do motherly things), and soon a yell of "I'm making sandwiches; shall we have roast beef or ham?"

"Roast beef!" I'd yell back. "And how many damn times do I have to tell you to come in quietly?"

It wouldn't hit me until I'd grabbed my bathrobe and headed down the hall to change into my jeans that lately I sounded like a frightening fusion of my parents' faults: my father's neediness, my mother's temper. And there would be Curran in the kitchen, still in his school uniform, dutifully spooning chutney. Fragile kiss on the cheek. "Did you have a good day, Mum?"

I should be doing this, I thought, sitting down at the table and for the second time in one day watching him grab napkins, pour tea (he knew how to boil tea and make coffee? had Bill taught him that? or was it Louise during her post-funeral lecture?), slice more bread for me. He munched away at his sandwich, one leg kicking his chair -- "Stop it," I said, "I don't need a headache" -- while I vowed to get up earlier in the mornings, to quit wallowing in tears and torpid water after work so I could be in charge again, if only for him. In Curran I searched for signs of my own quiet, perverse childhood, huge-eyed sorrows and disturbing precocities, but found none. You see? I told myself with the false brightness of rationale.

The fact that he felt compelled to perform these small, tenderly-executed duties, to make me sandwiches and alert me of my crookedly-applied lipstick, wasn't what bothered me. What bothered me was the fact that, as with Bill, I had come to expect them.

One night in late January I lay on my back beneath a red plaid quilt, shivering as I chewed one fingernail until the blood surged in my mouth. Light from a streetlamp outside spilled hieroglyphic shadow-symbols across the bedclothes.

The door opened. My breath grew tight. Every time I saw a hand on a doorknob, my body stuttered with anticipation, delusional hope. But no. It was only my son. "Mum," he whispered, "it's supertime. Are you going to get up?"

I nodded and turned on my side, propping on one elbow. He sat beside me on the mattress.

"Shall I ring the take-away man for Chinese?" he asked.

"Sure." I stroked his hair. He didn't squirm or protest my touch, but rather sat still and looked away from me, his face alarming in its stoicism; I knew what he really wanted was to run down the hall and order sweet and sour prawns, yet he knew he had to indulge me. I drew my hand back.

While he made the call, I stumbled into the bathroom and splashed water on my face and tied back my own hair. After a decade of living with the idiosyncrasies of British heating, I'd grown used to wearing two pairs of socks and enduring a perpetual slight chilliness, but following Bill's death I'd grown colder. I grabbed my robe from its hook and wrapped it around me.

The doorbell rang. "My wallet's on the hall table, Curran!" I yelled.

After a short pause I heard him call back, "I don't think it's the take-away man, Mum -- he hasn't any boxes and he doesn't look very Chinese."

"Well, that's nice and ethnocentric of you," I said as I came into the kitchen. The man at the door with short, gleaming black hair and disgustingly white teeth laughed. In his silk shirt, black jeans, and Doc Martens, he looked like just another thirtysomething Islington trendy, a brand of creature even I, the romantic Anglo-American, couldn't hide my disdain towards.. The memory-taste of vodka bobbed in my throat when I noticed the combat boots.

"Gloria Burgess?" he asked.

"Yes."

"I'm Jascha Kremsky." He offered his hand. Though I assumed from the name he was Russian, his accent was hard to place.

"And your point is?"

"I'm a sculptor at a co-op in Chelsea. The . . . the same one Bill belongs to. Belonged."

"Oh. Come in."

His name didn't sound familiar. Then again, there'd been so many in that group, so many who'd sat around our kitchen table with jumpy hands and excited voices and quasi-sophisticated chatter. The ones closer to him -- Lorin, Sean, Taylor -- had been at the funeral.

"Sorry I didn't call first," he said. "I hate to catch you at such a bad time and interrupt your dinner, but since I was just in the area I thought I'd stop by."

"You don't have to apologize," I said, motioning towards a chair as I dropped into one next to it. "Any time is bad around here lately."

"I'm sure it is." I liked the flatness in his voice, the objectivity it held. No pity, no mournfulness, just acknowledgment.

"Would you like some tea?"

"No, no thank you. I'm fine." He leaned back in his chair. "What I've come to talk to you about is Bill's work."

"His work?"

"Yes. Specifically the idea of a retrospective."

"It's not usual for an artist to get a retrospective at the age of thirty-two, is it?"

"No, but Bill wasn't your run-of-the-mill artist, was he?"

His voice was soft, eulogistic, coaxing.

"Let me ask you something," I said. "Why now? Why not six months ago, when Bill was euphoric and sure he was going to survive, when he would have loved to do a show? Why not two months ago, when he was getting sicker but still creating? Why not the night before he died when he was pumped full of morphine, for Christ's sake? Why the hell now?"

Jascha stared straight at me. I admired him for not flinching.

"There were some paintings," he said, "that Bill did in the last few months of his life. I've seen them at the co-op. They're extremely powerful and innovative, they're --"

"Enough criticspeak, I know which ones you're talking about."

"What I'm getting at is that they have a lot of pulling power. Which is not to say that his earlier works are bad pieces, but would they attract large numbers of people? No. However, with the inclusion of his last paintings, especially under the circumstances, since they detail a man coming to terms with his mortality --"

"What you're basically saying is that the only reason my husband is worth a retrospective is because dead people are more interesting." He nodded. "That's the most repulsive, exploitative thing I've ever heard."

The doorbell rang again. Curran, who'd been sitting and listening to our conversation with a mixture of fascination and fright, ran to answer it. This time it was the take-away man.

Jascha watched as Curran handed over a ten-pound note in exchange for a huge box and a plastic container of wonton soup. "How old is your son?" he asked.

"Eight."

His face softened. "He's a cute kid," he said, and then returned to his persuasive speech. "You must understand, Mrs. Burgess, that no-one's intention is to exploit Bill. We just have to hit the right time, the right climate."

"Victim art," I said. "Controversy. I understand full well what you're saying, but I still think it's sick."

"I'm sorry if this sounds harsh, but there is a commercial aspect to the promotion of art. One I don't think Bill fully realized or wanted to acknowledge."

Yes. That was Bill, gentle, idealistic, art-will-conquer-all. The last few months, he'd come home from the studio with a daub of green on his cheek, a smudge of sepia across his nose. He'd speak in TV movie cliches like "I think I'm going to beat this thing." I kissed him and said I was glad. Stupid, stupid darling. Did he really think he could stop leukemic cells with a paintbrush?

"It'll be big," Jascha said. "It'll be very tastefully done. We're hoping to get the Hayward or Whitechapel."

At the counter Curran struggled to get the lid off the soup. "Watch what you're doing," I said, "or you'll splash it all over yourself."

"Don't you think that this is what Bill would have wanted?" Jascha asked.

"I know this is what Bill would have wanted," I said, and stood. "But I also know that any maudlin memorial or trendy display could never pay homage to who Bill was. He was too complex."

"So you aren't giving us permission for the project?"

"You're very bright." I led him to the door. "Now I'd appreciate it if you'd get the hell out so my son and I can eat dinner in peace."

He drew a piece of paper from his pocket and handed it to me. "My number. In case you change your mind."

"I don't intend to."

He stepped outside, then turned around to say more. "Mrs. Burgess --"

I slammed the door on him.

After dinner I sat at the kitchen table and stared at the wadded napkins, the smudged water glasses, Curran's aborted homework, which was so illegible it looked more like the Cyrillic alphabet than a set of multiplication problems. I felt split open. My throat hurt even though I hadn't been yelling at Jascha.

One afternoon years ago Bill and I had gone museum-trekking in the middle of winter and I'd forgotten my gloves. When we came home he sat me down on the red paisley couch in the living room, knelt before me on the floor, and massaged my numb hands. "This is going to hurt," he said, and it did. They were great stabs, those pains of regained feeling, and I felt them again now.

Curran padded back in, barefoot and fresh from his bath, clad in pale blue flannel, hair damp. A comb swung in his grasp. "Come here," I said. "Let me get the knots out for you."

He came and turned his back towards me so I could get the most unruly bit at the nape of his neck. His warmth comforted me. I ran the comb's teeth through the moist tangled curls, and saw Bill's hair, soft and brown and falling out in clumps.

Curran wriggled.

"Mum," he said, "if there's an exhibit of Dad's, can I go to it with you?"

"There isn't going to be an exhibit."

He whipped around to face me. "But you said that that's what Dad would have wanted."

I set the comb on the table and took his face in my hands. "Forget about it," I said, and kissed his forehead. "Put some slippers on and finish your math, all right?"

That night I had the dream.

I was standing with my father in total darkness at the side of the M6 motorway to Manchester. Suddenly two cars came from opposite directions, washing us in the terrible gleam of their headlights and slamming into each other. We saw the driver of one car, a young girl, fly against the windshield, her eyes wide. "Adrienne," my father sobbed, and clutched me to him, burying my face against his chest and holding me there until I suffocated.

I'd dreamt the same thing for years. This time, though, I didn't startle out of sleep right away like I normally did. I dreamt that Jascha Kremsky held my head under in the river Lethe, and I fought, unable to decide whether to struggle to the surface or let the water take me down, torn between the need to remember and the desire to forget.