

## Trains

by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

In her earliest memories, Corinne saw trains. Big, black trains that belched smoke and ash, their metal wheels grinding on metal track. The old trains, not the streamlined vehicles they would become, but the trains of her childhood, the glamour trains that, a decade later, would span the continent. She always associated Silas with trains, but she didn't actually see him until she was fourteen.

She was running down the street, her long skirt twisted and her hair disheveled, escaping the house, escaping her stepfather and his roving fingers. When her breasts grew and the blood came, his fingers seemed to grow longer, more demanding, and more than once he rubbed his crotch against hers. She hadn't told anyone; he said he would hurt her if she did. And so she just endured the fingers and the rubbing until the day when she would marry, when another man would save her from all of that.

She tripped as she ran up a flight of stairs and found herself on the train platform. In the distance, she could see the billowing smoke signaling an approaching engine. She turned to run back down, but her skirt caught, sending her flying across the rails. She looked again toward the train. A man dressed in a black suit sat on the cow catcher, strumming a banjo. The sight mesmerized her; she didn't even think of getting up.

She wouldn't know until years later that she was looking at Silas.

Then someone grabbed her blouse. The fabric ripped and she pushed her hands against the wooden ties. Her stepfather had followed her. He was going to embarrass her here, in public, in front of the man with the banjo. Another hand grabbed her armpit, brushing against her breast, and pulled her against the platform. She landed on her back, sending the air through her in a whoosh as the train roared by.

No man sat on the cow catcher. She had imagined him, his banjo, everything.

And nearly died.

"You okay?"

She looked up into a soot-begrimed face. The eyes gazing down on her were green, surrounded by thick, thick lashes. "You okay?" he asked again.

"I think the wind got knocked out of me, but other than that." Her voice came out breathless and tired. He wrapped a coat from a nearby bench around her. She looked down. Some of her skin was showing through the rips in her blouse. With her left hand, she closed the front of the coat. "Thank you," she said.

"That was close."

She nodded.

He sat beside her. He smelled of coal and woodsmoke. "I'm Nathan."

"Corinne," she said, and smiled her prettiest smile.

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She didn't meet Silas until nearly seven years later. Nathan had left the night before on one of his many trips for the railroad. Corinne buttoned the sleeves on her dress. The bruises on her arms had faded, but were still visible. She touched the mark on her cheek. If she wore a hat, no one would notice.

She leaned against the wavy glass. He would be gone for a week. A week without his yelling or the fist that came crashing into her even when she hadn't done anything wrong. Sometimes she thought all men spoke loudest with their hands. But she knew differently. Her real father hadn't touched her at all. Her real father had been an honorable man who had died in an honorable way. She had a medal from President Lincoln to prove it.

Corinne put a basket over her arm and one of her prettiest bonnets on her head. Her gown was a bit faded and too warm, but it would have to do. Her daughter was asleep and would stay so for a few more hours. Corinne was going out; she didn't care what Nathan would say.

The morning was fresh, clear, not yet hot, although the stale-sweet odor of horses permeated the air. A horse she had never seen before was tied outside the bank; another in front of the general store. She looked at the pair as she passed. Both were dapple grays, so much alike that they seemed to be the same animal.

"Startling creatures, aren't they?"

Corinne whirled, surprised by the soft baritone. A man sat on the rough-hewn bench in front of the store, his face shaded by his wide-brimmed hat. His legs were crossed and a banjo rested on his knee.

"You surprised me," she said.

"No more than you surprise me." He took off his hat. His hair was jet-black and his skin was the color of wheat. His eyes sparkled. Their blueness seemed to match the morning sky. "But I suppose you're wearing a wedding band."

She held out her left hand. The thick gold ring seemed tarnished, binding. She could almost feel it constricting her finger.

He nodded. "I'm Silas."

"Corinne."

"It's a mite warm to be wearing long sleeves, Corinne."

She flushed and ducked her head aside so that he couldn't see. The sentence was too pointed. He knew what her sleeves were hiding. "I'm shopping," she said.

He touched her hand. His fingertips were hard but the rest of the skin was soft. She pulled away.

"A good Christian lady would stand and talk."

His eyes made her nervous. There was too much intelligence in them. He seemed to miss nothing. "I'm not a good Christian lady," she said.

Any other man would have taken that as a rebuke, but Silas seemed to hear the truth behind the words. "Then you can take the ring off," he said, "and it won't make any difference."

She smiled. "You're forward, Silas."

"And you're lonely." He stood up, grabbing his banjo by the neck. "Let me take you home and make you something to eat."

"Thank you," she said, moving closer to the door. "But I have shopping to do."

He shook his head. "Best wait for that. Mrs. Stevens died in her sleep."

Corinne froze. Mrs. Stevens, who ran the store, had been sick, but not that sick. "You were just inside?"

"Yes." He slung the banjo across his back and went down the steps, touching the flank of the dapple gray. "The banjo and I, we have a bit of magic. It makes the pain go away."

"Of course," Corinne said, following him. "Like taking off my wedding ring makes the marriage go away."

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Nathan arrived a week later. The back door banged open, knocking Corinne out of sleep. She huddled in the middle of the bed, knowing from the heavy footsteps that Nathan was home and Silas wouldn't share her bed any more.

"Corinne?" Nathan's voice was loud, the diction slurred. "I'm gonna find you, you slut."

Slut. A new word. She shivered and pulled the covers up tighter. If she were a more courageous woman, she would get the gun he left for her in the bureau.

"I don't leave to have my wife sleeping with no fancy man."

She swallowed. Angry and drunk. He had almost killed her that last time. She got out of bed and smoothed her nightgown against her body, the nightgown that she had worn waiting for Silas. Her feet whispered across the scratchy wood floor as she walked to the bureau.

A light grew in the hall. Maxine cried out in her sleep. Corinne opened the bureau drawer and felt among the linens until she found the gun barrel. A man stood in the doorway, silhouetted against the light.

"Bitch."

She took a deep breath and pulled the gun out, holding it with both hands. She was shaking. "Leave me alone."

"Goddamn slu -- " A sharp crack echoed and the silhouette crumpled slowly to the floor. Corinne still held the shaking gun. A wisp of smoke seemed to rise from its mouth.

"Mommy! Mommy!" Maxine was shrieking.

"Tell her it's all right, Corinne." A deep baritone, rumbling from the hall.

"Silas!" Corinne had never felt so relieved. Jesus, it had been Silas who stopped Nathan. She had been afraid that she had done it.

"Mommy!"

"It's all right, Maxy. Mommy will be right there." She set the gun back in the bureau and walked out into the hall. A lantern sat on the floor and beside it lay Nathan, blood seeping from his chest. Silas bent over him, the banjo slung across his back.

"Is he dead?" Corinne asked.

Silas nodded. He pulled the banjo around to the front and began to pick, although Corinne could barely hear the notes. "Get Maxine," he said.

She went into her daughter's bedroom. The little girl was sobbing, large whooping sounds that caught in her throat. Corinne picked her up, smelled the sleeping-child sweat mixed with fear, and stroked her daughter's hair. "It's all okay," Corinne whispered, and with each note she began to believe it.

Finally, she took Maxine out into the hall. Silas seemed surprised to see her. He touched her face, nodded, as if he recognized her calmness and said, "I have to leave."

The calm shattered. Maxine's body tensed as Corinne's did. "No," Corinne whispered. "You can't leave me now."

He studied her for a long moment. "I like you, Corinne."

"Then stay," she said.

"I can't."

She gazed at Nathan's body and then at the home which had never been a home, only a place of pain and bruises. The choice was easy. "I'll come with you."

"I usually travel alone. I've never allowed anyone to come with me before." He plucked idly at the banjo. The notes sent shivers through Corinne. Finally, he sighed. "There are three rules you have to follow. Ask no questions. Put yourself first."

"That's two," she said, afraid that her statement was too close to a question.

"Go ahead." He smiled. "Your last question before all of this starts."

She swallowed. "What's the third rule?"

"When I leave, do not follow. Wait for me to come back."

Corinne smiled and hugged her daughter closer. "I think I can do that," she said.

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After they'd made love, Corinne lay on her side of the bed and stared at the banjo glistening in the dark. She knew that some time before dawn, Silas would creep out of bed, grab the banjo and disappear for several hours. Sometimes he left in the middle of meals and sometimes he didn't come home at all. She couldn't question him, but he had seen the look in her eyes once, just once, toward the beginning.

"I'm the only one working Nevada," he said, as if that were an explanation. "It gets tiring."

Tiring for her, too, wondering where he was and what he was doing. There always seemed to be enough money, more than enough, he told her, even if he never returned.

He always spoke as if he would never return.

She waited until his breathing was steady and even, then she got out of bed. The throw rug felt soft against her bare feet. She crossed the rug and knelt in front of the banjo. In all the time she had been with Silas, she had never touched it.

It seemed to shine even more up close, although the moonlight fell away from the banjo and across the bed. She reached out and her fingers brushed the rounded front surface. It was scratchy and hot, not like an instrument at all, but like a living thing.

"Corinne?"

She turned. The moonlight fell across Silas, his hair tousled and the sheets pooled around his naked waist. "What is it, Silas?" she asked. "What's it made of?"

His mouth fell open and he let out a small, quiet sigh. "It's magic, Corinne," he said. "It brings rest, peace, and comfort to the people who hear it."

"You never use it to give me peace," she said.

"I did once." He ran a hand through his thick hair. "When Nathan died."

"I wasn't at peace." The banjo throbbed beneath her hand. "You were going to leave."

He sighed again. "There is only one time when a body can be truly at peace, Corinne."

A glimmer of understanding flashed through her. He was talking about death. Silas had come for Nathan that night, not for her. She was about to grab the idea when she realized why Silas had sounded so sad. She clapped both hands over her mouth. "Silas," she said. "I'm sorry. I'll never do it again. I promise. I'll never -- "

He shook his head and got out of bed. He grabbed his pants and slipped them on. "I love you," he said.

She stood up and reached for him. Her fingers slipped right through his arm -- or perhaps he had moved away from her as he buttoned his shirt. "I love you, too," she said. "I promise. I'll never ask another question. Just stay, okay?"

He picked up his banjo. "You'll see me again," he said.

But, as she sat alone in the darkness, she realized that he'd never said he would be back, like he always had in the past. Just a promise that she would see him again.

Although she wouldn't see him again for a long time, not for ten more years.

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Corinne stood in front of the crowd. Maxine hadn't wanted to come. "What do I want to see any dumb old death train for?" she had asked. She was fifteen. Corinne had been five when her mother had taken her to a presidential death train. Funny how life repeated itself, adding its own little twists as time went on.

The train slowed as it approached. Its locomotive and passenger cars were draped in black. Flags rested across it as if they mourned too. She had never realized how much a train looked like a coffin.

The train was supposed to pass slowly so that everyone could whisper their goodbyes to the president, McKinley, felled by an assassin's bullet. But, in a screech of brakes and a hiss of steam, the train stopped. The crowd seemed motionless.

A man stepped down from the platform. He was tall and reedy, a banjo slung around his back.

"Silas!" she whispered.

He saw her and smiled.

"You look the same," she said.

The years hadn't touched him, although they had added wrinkles to her eyes and a streak of silver to her hair.

"I know." He stood between her and the old man beside her, close enough, but not close enough to touch. "And I will look the same on the day you die."

"I want you beside me," she said, meaning now, meaning forever.

"I'll be there. No matter how far away you are, I'll be there." He reached out as if to kiss her and then stopped himself. His eyes turned down sadly. He pushed past the old man and started back for the train.

"Silas," Corinne said, grabbing his arm. This time, her fingers did slip through as if he weren't really there at all.

He kept moving. As the train began to chug its way to full power, Silas grabbed the metal railing beside the stairs. "Be strong," he said. "That's what I have always admired about you, Corinne. You're strong."

And then he disappeared. The train eased forward, wheels squealing, and the crowd noises filtered into her ears. Low conversation, sobbing, an occasional sigh. The old man beside her gasped. Corinne stared at the flags, standing out in sharp relief against the train's black iron sides.

The old man gasped again. She turned. His face was blue and he clutched at his chest.

"What's happening?" someone cried.

"He's dying," Corinne said. The old man collapsed on the platform. People circled around him. Corinne loosened his shirt. As his last breath rattled in his throat, he reached out to her.

Behind her, the train's whistle wailed.

She turned. Despite the pain around her heart, she did not cry as the caboose faded in the gray skies.

She knew she would see Silas one more time.