

[...]

Marjorie turned to Alan and said, “Jennifer did bury herself in her graduate studies for quite a while, you know. I think she said something about running into you on a train a year or two ago, while she was in the middle of all that?”

“That’s right. Your daughter was a true heroine that day, but I’m sure she told you all about it.”

“No, she didn’t say much about it at all.”

Alan looked at Jennifer, who shrugged her shoulders.

“Well, I think you ought to know about it,” he replied.

“Tell us about it.” Roger smiled, sounding friendlier.

“It was in the middle of that big hurricane in September of ’38. Do you remember the train that was nearly washed away near Stonington, Connecticut?”

Roger replied, “Let’s see . . . That does ring a bell, but I’ve forgotten the details. There were so many amazing stories from the hurricane.”

“The train was the Bostonian—the 1100 Shore Line Limited from New York to Boston. I had boarded the train in New London to go home to Boston on leave. The train was late, and it crept

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out around 1600, excuse me, four o'clock, way behind schedule. By then, the wind was really blowing. There were a lot of leaves, twigs, shingles, and things like that in the air."

"So you and Jennifer were actually on this train?" Gertrude interjected.

"That's right, although at first I had no idea that she was on it. The eye of the hurricane moved north along the Connecticut River, so east of the river, the wind and tidal surge were stronger. Sections of the railroad to the east of New London are very close to the ocean. The train was going slowly, because the engineer was worried about the roadbed. We had reached a point just short of Stonington when the train stopped. The train was sitting on an exposed section of raised roadbed and trestle, right next to the ocean, and the water was already right up to the rails.

"The last car was the luxury parlor car. Shortly after the train stopped, that car began to tip toward the ocean because the roadbed was being undermined. The people from that car came forward to the next car, where I was. People started to panic and push and shove to go forward to the next cars. The conductor opened the door on the left side so some of us could move forward by walking beside the train. The water was up over my knees.

"When I got about halfway up to the locomotive, there were quite a few people wading forward by then. I could see that the train had stopped for a red light on a signal tower a little farther down the track. All of a sudden, I realized that the person in front of me was Jennifer. She was helping a woman with three children. They were each carrying one child, and they were pulling a bigger boy along. I shouted to Jennifer that I could take the bigger boy. Jennifer turned and recognized me, and she shouted to the woman to let me take the boy. The woman nodded, I put the boy on my shoulders, and we started forward again."

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Marjorie interjected, “So, you and Jennifer were helping this woman? Did you know her, Jennifer? How old were the children?”

Jennifer replied, “No, I didn’t know her, but I could see that she needed help. I’d guess the children were maybe three, five, and seven years old. Of course, we were all scared, the children most of all, but I felt much better when Alan miraculously appeared.”

Alan continued, “We reached the passenger car behind the tender, which had become very crowded. I saw one of the train crew deliberately submerge himself in the water next to the coupling at the back end of that car. By then, the current coming between the cars from seaward was really strong and full of debris, so going underwater took a lot of courage. It looked like he was trying to uncouple the rest of the train so that it could be left behind. We found out later that was exactly what he was doing. It was a hell of a job, but he did it and survived.

“We hoped the engineer would decide to ignore the red signal and move the train forward to higher ground, which we could see was only a few hundred yards ahead. It was clear that the best chance to survive was to stick with the train if it could be moved ahead, because the depth of water, strong current and debris made drowning likely if anyone left the train.

We kept on to the front of that car and saw that there were already a lot of people on the tender. This was a very strange sight, but every square foot was needed to carry all the passengers. We kept going to the cab of the locomotive. There were already a couple of passengers in the cab, but the engineer motioned us to come up. Jennifer climbed up and sat on the floor of the cab, and I lifted the children up to her one by one. She passed them up into the cab, then jumped off and helped me lift the woman up to the cab. We helped some other mothers and children up, as well. By then, the engineer was blowing the whistle and shouting to everyone that he was getting ready

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to move the train. The cab was full of people and there was no room for Jennifer or me.”

“What happened? Did you and Jennifer get left behind?” asked Marjorie.

“Almost. I shouted to her that we should try for the front of the locomotive, and we waded to the front end of the locomotive as fast as we could. The whistle blew again, and I was pretty sure that meant the train was about to start. I shouted to Jennifer that the silver-painted part at the front of the locomotive might be hot, so she should get on the gangway that ran along the side of the boiler, above the driving wheels, and go further back. Then I boosted her up on the cow catcher. The wind coming around the front of the locomotive caught her and nearly blew her off, but she held on to the railing and pulled herself to the right, behind the front end and out of the wind. Then she went up the steps and back along the gangway. I was right behind her, and I nearly got blown off the cow catcher, myself. On the gangway, we got down out of the wind and flying debris.”

Alan recalled the scene like it had just happened. Jennifer had lain down flat on the gangway, both to get out of the wind and because she was exhausted. He lay down on top of her to protect both her and himself. He still remembered the feel of her body and her hair in his face. Jennifer had thanked him afterward. He left this part out of the story; the Warrens did not need to know all the details.

Jennifer supplied the details. “I was exhausted, so I lay down on the gangway. Alan lay down on top of me—for a second, I thought he was taking great liberties, but then I realized that he was shielding me from all the debris that was flying around. I was very glad he was there.”

Alan glanced at Marjorie and Roger, and saw that their eyebrows were coming back down from the heights they had reached. He

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continued. “As the train started to move, the steam shot up through the stack with the usual roar, and it was a very welcome sound, I can tell you. We heard later that everyone on the train cheered at the sound, but we couldn’t hear it over the wind.

“The front of the locomotive snagged some low-hanging wires. As it moved forward, the wires became taut and began to pull over the poles. Luckily, we were far enough back along the locomotive that the wires didn’t touch us. We did feel several thumps resonate through the locomotive as large boats bounced off the other side. The locomotive slowed, and I turned to look forward. I watched as the locomotive began nudging aside a house that had come to rest partly across the tracks.”

David exclaimed, “Horse feathers! There was a house on the tracks?”

“Just about everything was drifting in the water and crossing the tracks, but the locomotive pushed the house aside like it was nothing. A little farther, there was a large sailboat on its side across the tracks, and the locomotive came to a stop against the sailboat. It was jammed in the tracks somehow and wouldn’t move. I could feel the driving wheels slipping against the rails, and I got really worried that we were stuck. We were still exposed to wind and water. I heard a loud crack, and the sailboat swung around and went off to leeward. The locomotive surged forward until we were completely onto the high ground, not far from the middle of Stonington.”

“Phew. You made it,” Marjorie exclaimed.

“The town put us up in the Town Hall and the Catholic Church, and the townspeople gave us food and dry clothing. The next day, the railroad got us buses to Providence and Boston. Jennifer got on the first bus and went on her way. I didn’t see her again until this spring.”

“Well, that is quite a story, Alan, thank you for telling us,” Roger said, smiling again. [...]