

Voyage of Shadows: Murder on the S.S. Normandie

●●●by Dana●●●

Author Notes: The subtitle, *Murder on the SS Normandie*, is an homage to one of my favorite novels of all time, *Murder on the Orient Express*. *Come, Tell Me How You Live* is an autobiographical travelogue by Agatha Christie written during World War II. Another thank you to Julia, Susan, and Mary for making this way stronger. {{hugs}}
Word count: 3,493.

Prologue: Come, Tell Me How You Live

August 28, 1938

Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire, England

Hearing a small giggle, Peter Belden looked up from the letter he was intently reading and stared into familiar blue eyes. His wife of 25 years sat across the table from him, a mischievous smile curving her lips now that she finally managed to catch his attention with a very un-Helen-like sound.

“Good news from Harold?” she asked, gesturing toward the piece of paper her husband held before she lifted the elegant Limoges porcelain cup to take a sip of the strong, hot tea it contained. She was still waiting for a response as she placed the family heirloom back down on its matching porcelain saucer. As in other households all over Great Britain, tea time was sacred in the Belden house, so the fact that Peter was reading a letter instead of concentrating wholeheartedly on the afternoon ritual told her that the contents of the letter, from Peter’s older brother Harold in America, was important.

“I’m sorry, darling,” Peter said, a contrite look settling on his dark features. “But since it was a post from the States...”

Helen laughed outright at his apology. “Oh, Peter! You must know I’m not serious. Of course you should read your brother’s letter,” she said with a dismissive wave of her hand. “The tea is here every day; news from your brother is not. What does Harold have to say?”

At his wife’s question, Peter grew serious. “The mining operation he established in Idaho is doing exceptionally well. He wants us to come to America.”

“A holiday in America sounds lovely,” Helen commented as she brought the teacup, with its delicate floral pattern, to her lips once again.

Peter shook his head. “Not for a holiday, Helen. Permanently. He’s been talking to Roosevelt, and he doesn’t think we should stay in Britain. Hitler is...well, he’s not the passing threat that people thought, apparently. Harold doesn’t feel we’re safe here in Europe anymore.”

“Not safe?” Helen asked incredulously, a blonde eyebrow arching as she considered her husband’s words. “But that...that *mad man* is on the *continent*. Surely, here in Britain we’ll be safe. It’s *Britain*.” If anyone embodied the stalwart Brit admonishment to “keep calm and carry on,” it was Helen Johnson Belden.

Again, Peter shook his head. “Harold is sure that Europe will be at war soon, and even our little isle won’t be safe. Apparently, the German army has recently begun mobilizing, and that is never a good sign. Unfortunately, according to Harold via President Roosevelt, our *dear* prime minister is ready to do anything to appease that horrid little man instead of taking the fight to him.” Peter’s sarcastic emphasis in describing the man left no doubt as to how he felt about PM Chamberlain.

Helen's eyes, so full of amusement just a few moments before, clouded. "I have to admit that I do fear that that vile little man is power hungry and can cause quite a bit of damage," she admitted. "And there *are* the children to think of..."

Peter nodded. "Quite. If Roosevelt is concerned... I think we should really begin to consider what is happening on the continent and how it affects our family." His serious dark eyes bored into Helen's troubled blue ones as he said gravely, "And our safety."

August 28, 1937

Manhattan, New York City, New York

"Darling, a continental tour after Honey's debut will be simply fabulous," Madeleine coaxed her husband. "One last summer fling before she has to settle down with one of the eligible young society men she'll surely attract during her debut."

Matthew Wheeler's lips quirked. "A grand tour for Honey—and her mother," he observed, a jovial note entering his voice.

Madeleine's soft features relaxed into a becoming smile as she looked up at her husband, giving his arm a delicate swat with her slender arm. "Well, if I *need* to be a chaperone, then I just need to be a chaperone," she said, a mischievous note entering her musical, lilting voice. It was a voice that matched her graceful, golden exterior to a "T."

At that, Matt threw his full head of red hair back and gave a loud guffaw. "Of course—a young lady on the continent *needs* a proper chaperone. It's so wonderful of you to volunteer to make that sacrifice, my dear."

Madeleine laughed in response, a tinkling laugh that made one think of cherubs and angels. Everything about Madeleine Hart Wheeler was graceful, golden, and composed. She was no mere society woman, though, and so much more than just a pretty face standing next to her husband. Matthew loved her for her intelligence and for her fierce love of their only child, another cherubic girl he adored to no end. Their daughter's name was Madeleine, like her mother, but the girl's sweet disposition and honey brown hair had earned her the nickname of Honey, a moniker that fit the darling young woman perfectly.

"You'll come, of course, won't you, Matthew?" Madeleine asked, becoming serious. "Surely, there's business on the continent that you could attend to."

Matthew's features grew more serious than Madeleine would have expected given their jovial, lighthearted conversation. He forced himself to relax as he said, "I'm sure, with the writing that's on the wall, that there is more than enough business to keep me occupied in Europe for a month or two."

Madeleine raised a perfectly arched eyebrow. "The writing on the wall? *That's* a vulgar phrase. You don't mean that Hitler fellow, do you?" Mrs. Wheeler's voice showed exactly what kind of regard she held *that* fellow in—the term "icy disdain" might just about begin to cover it.

Matt nodded, his green eyes infinite pools of knowledge in that moment. "I do. I'm not sure what direction things are going to go. As a matter of fact..." He trailed off.

"What?" his wife prompted him.

“If things escalate, I’m not sure I *want* my wife and my daughter over in Europe.”

Madeleine stared at him, agape. “Surely, you’re overreacting. Things can’t be *that* serious, can they? We’d stay out of Spain, of course.”

Matthew snorted. “That Spanish scuffle? That’s nothing. Especially with Franco being declared head of the Spanish state. That will be over before you know it—a tempest in a teapot, and the world changed not at all. It’s this business between Hitler and that Italian man, Mussolini. I think things could get dicey over there, and there are those in our government who would surely agree. Even with the Brits and their stalwart attitude trying to keep the peace over there, there’s only so much one small island nation can do.”

“Well, I’m going to go ahead and start planning anyway. I want the summer of our daughter’s eighteenth birthday to be magical. World events be damned.” She swore casually and with impunity before she gave her husband a seductive smile. “I want our daughter to have what I had. My coming of age trip was magical.” She paused for effect, changing her smile from seductive to liting and innocent. “You *do* remember?”

Matt’s face softened, and he gathered his wife into his arms. “I do seem to recall meeting a lovely eighteen-year-old experiencing the wonders of the continent for the first time. “ He gazed into the depths of Madeleine’s hazel eyes...sometimes more brown, sometimes more green, but always with a mysterious amber hue underneath. His voice grew husky with love, lust, and remembrance. “The lights of Paris didn’t hold a candle to her. *Couldn’t* hold a candle to her.”

Madeleine smiled, remembering the child she had been when she had met the love of her life, and leaned into her husband’s embrace, appreciating the fact that her husband still whispered sweet nothings into her ear so many years later. “And I seem to remember standing at the Arc de Triomphe and seeing a handsome redheaded man. He was just out of Harvard Business School, eager to take his place in the world and prove to his father that he was able to lead the family business into even higher heights of greatness.”

Matt placed a gentle kiss on his wife’s lips. “And the rest, as they say, was history. Yes, God willing, Honey *should* have a grand tour of the continent. Who knows just who she’ll meet?”

August 28, 1936
Kilmainham, Ireland

“Darlin’, I’m tellin’ ye’,” Edmund Lynch said to his wife, Kathleen, “we need to try to make our fortunes somewhere else.”

“But leave Ireland?” Kathleen asked. “’Tis our homeland. Our families are here.”

“We’ve some family in New York,” Edmund reminded her. “We wouldn’t be alone. But with de Valera trying to distance Ireland from Britain, things are growing worse and worse. The bloody Brits have put a choke hold on us. We’re losing the Economic War that damned Fianna Fáil’s brought upon us, and things get worse each year. I don’t know what to do anymore!”

“But, Eddie, our home...” dark-haired, blue-eyed Kathleen Lynch protested weakly, her tired but pretty face stricken at the reality Eddie was laying out before her. It wasn’t so much the idea of moving to America, but rather that she knew, deep in her heart, that their beloved country was dying. Things had

gone from bad to worse over the years, and now there was going to be another Lynch mouth to feed. And so soon after the twins had arrived! It was rather shocking how fast the family was growing, especially since their oldest, Diana, had been an only child for so long.

The couple sat at their tiny, scarred wooden table, discussing the possibility of moving across the ocean to America for a better life, their voices low so as not to wake their children. They knew that they would need to save for the voyage, but it was so hard! They were already living on a shoe string, barely eking out a living.

“How are we going to set anything aside for the passage over?” Kathleen fretted. “We’re barely getting by as it is.”

“I can take another job,” Edmund said stoically.

“Eddie!” Kathleen exclaimed and then immediately caught herself and lowered her voice. “You’ve already got two jobs!”

“I know, but I’m going to have to get another one with the new baby coming, anyway,” Eddie said, no accusation in his voice nor even resignation. He was excited about this newest child, no matter what he or she meant to them financially. “If we use the wages from an extra job for expenses for the new baby, and we put anything that’s left over from those wages for passage to America, I figure we can make it across in about two years. I know it seems like a long time, and it will be a lot of work, but I just know that we can make our fortune in America, Katy. I just know we can!” he said, a passion in his voice that moved his wife.

She nodded. Her eyes, as blue as delphiniums, glistened with unshed tears. “Aye, I know you’re right,” she conceded in her gentle Irish lilt. “And I know that Maureen and Donnie have done well over in New York. And I know that if you just had a chance, a fresh start, away from this place where everyone wants to pigeonhole you, that you, Edmund, can do something really, really great. Grand even!” she declared.

Edmund reached out to grasp his wife’s hand. “Thanks for believin’ in me, luv. It means the world to me that I have you and the kids.” He looked down at her belly. “All of our kids, even the wee one not born yet. We’ll make it through because we have each other.”

August 28, 1935
London, England

Jim Frayne walked among his fellow Londonites, trying to blend into the crowd as he strode down the grey sidewalk. Everything here in London was grey. The streets. The buildings. The sky. His life since he had lost both of his parents.

Life had had color before that. Blue skies above their farmland in the Cotswolds. The green fields that stretched out endlessly in all directions. The red poppies in his mother’s garden. The yellow daffodils that grew behind their house.

Losing his father when he had been ten years old had changed all that. That’s when the colors had started to become muted to Jim. Losing Win, a good man adored by his wife and only child, had been bad enough, but even as he and his mother had begun to manage to eke out a meager living, things had gotten worse.

When Katie Frayne met Jones, Jim's world had gone from bad to worse, from sideways to upside down. Sure, the stoop-shouldered little man had taken care of Jim's mother, and Jim had been grudgingly grateful for that, but his stepfather had always made it clear that his love for Katie most certainly did not extend to her son. Jim wondered if it was because Katie had often told her son, within earshot of Jones, that he was the spitting image of his father, and Jones had not wanted any reminders of the man who had come before him.

Out of love for Katie, the two had been able to keep their mutual contempt of each other from her. Katie had gone to her early grave not realizing the depth of the hatred that had grown between her second husband and her son.

On some levels, Jim felt guilty for keeping the animosity from her. They'd always been so truthful with each other. Before Jones, they had told each other everything. But after Jones, well, Jim could see how much it would have broken his mother's heart if she had known the truth. He could never bring himself to intentionally hurt his mother, so he swallowed his feelings and turned his situation into a game. He wasn't an actor, had no desire to be one, but to keep his mom happy, he would play the game. He would see, every day, whether his performance could be just a little bit better than the day before. Playing that game, pretending he was Errol Flynn or Clark Gable or Douglas Fairbanks, made it easier to live with the fact that he was essentially lying to the one person he loved more than anyone on Earth.

After his mum had died, Jim had been able to put up with his stepfather for about three months before he had run away from Jones' truck farm outside of New Malden, a tiny rural village in Surrey. For the thirteen months since then, Jim had managed to survive on the streets of London, taking handouts when he could get them, performing odd jobs for those who needed them. He was a husky lad, familiar with farms, and he would have loved to have found a job on a farm, working the land, but the bleak streets of London were the best he could do as a runaway.

As Jim moved along the grey sidewalks, huddled among the masses, the sky opened up, and it began to pour. Trying fruitlessly to pull the back of his collar up over his head to protect him from Mother Nature's onslaught, Jim darted his green eyes around until they found a covered doorway. He hurried over to it, not caring that most proprietors of establishments frowned on ne'er-do-wells loitering in their doorways and would probably order him to leave. As he hid in the shadows of the sheltering eave, he reflected on how he was going to be able to find a place to stay that night where he could dry off. He usually didn't end up this soaked, and the red-headed young man feared that he would be carrying the wetness around for days.

It was then that he realized that he was not alone in hovering in the pub's doorway. Another young man—about his age, with hair as black as night, dark eyes, sharp cheek bones, and a haunted look—was clearly trying to stay dry as well. His clothes were even more tattered than Jim's. Fleeting, Jim thought of a wounded animal, weary from being hunted and hurt by humans, and he wondered if he, too, sported the same look.

The young man stared at him. In the end, he must have decided that he had found a kindred spirit in Jim, because he offered up, "The name's Dan."

August 28, 1934
Belfast, Ireland

Dan Mangan stood next to the body of his mother, unable to believe that both of his parents were gone. It had been bad enough that his father had died in a training accident serving with the Royal Air Force. He had joined the Defence Forces as a way to provide for his wife and his son. Dan firmly believed that when people acted selflessly, providing for others before themselves, they should be rewarded, not punished. God clearly had other thoughts.

Dan blamed the service for his mother's death, too. If the pension that his mother had received following his father's death hadn't been so paltry, she wouldn't have had to work herself to the bone, and she wouldn't have gotten sick. She would have been healthy enough to fight off the influenza that had stricken her—or maybe she wouldn't have ever come down with it at all.

There were too many “what ifs?” for such a young life.

A nurse entered the tiny cell of a hospital room then. “Son, I’m sorry, but we really do need to take your mother now,” she said, her Irish brogue thick with sympathy for the young lad.

Dan looked up at the stout woman with the fading red hair and tired, watery blue eyes. She had been very kind to his mother as she had cared for her during her final two days, and Dan appreciated that. She'd been very kind to him, too, but now she had to do her job, he supposed.

And, really, what good was it to continue to stare at the lifeless body of Caitlín Mangan? His ma wasn't there. This was just her earthly shell. Her soul was gone, off to join Da. As bleak as Dan felt, a small measure of comfort enveloped him, knowing that his parents were reunited—even if he didn't know what he was going to do here on Earth in their absence. His parents had loved each other. Their feelings were so tangible that even when he was a child, little Danny could palpably sense the love between them. He now could imagine their joy in finding each other again. It was something that he had to hold onto now. It was all he had left.

Of course, the tiny bit of solace that Dan received knowing that his parents were finally together again did nothing in the way of providing shelter or food for the young teenager. He reflected that his own mother had been an orphan. She had had a little brother whom the family had fondly called Liam, short for William. Caitlín had always spoken tenderly and affectionately—and wistfully—of her brother. But she had been much older than Liam and had gone to an all-girls orphanage for those of an age who had no chance of being adopted. When she had left the orphanage at the age of sixteen, two years after she had arrived, she had tried desperately to find her little brother, but he had seemingly vanished. William Regan was nowhere to be found.

Dan's father hadn't been an orphan, but Timothy Mangan's mother and father had died not long after Dan was born, so the young man had never known his paternal grandparents, either. Caitlín had always told Dan that his grandparents had doted on their only grandson before a tragic horse and buggy accident had claimed their lives one dismal, rainy evening.

Dan was truly alone in the world.

He didn't want to let the kind nurse know that, though. He had heard enough stories from his ma to know that he most definitely did not want to be sent to an orphanage. And he was pretty sure that his mother had never told him the truly bad stories.

“Thank you, ma’am,” he said to the nurse, standing. He gave his mother’s hand, even now growing cold, one last squeeze.

“I guess I need to tell my uncle the news,” he said.

The nurse just looked at him, something indefinable in her pale blue eyes that Dan didn’t want to think about.

“Thank you for...everything,” he said before quietly slipping out of the room and forcing himself not to look back at the lifeless form of his mother.

He stole out of the front doors of the hospital and disappeared into the Belfast evening.