

PASSAGE OAK
excerpt

We wrestle constantly with the problem of which bridges to burn and which bridges to cross.

Where do we find the conviction to make a choice? “Measureless oceans of space”, spanned by a bridge -- should we cross or not? We make a decision with a flutter of fear, and that bridge falls behind, forever behind us. Try as we might, we can never circle back there again. Not to that same bridge, over that same space.

Caroline Sydney burned a bridge when she decided that she and her daughter must part. Emilia was four days old. This separation broke open an abyss that could never be bridged. The mother struggled with it. The daughter struggled with it. It was a ghost that walked beside them all their days, a persistent wondering about the other. How could such an emptiness weigh so heavily? By a wonderful coincidence, they did finally come together, but their meeting was cruelly interrupted. Death issued that decree. Their time together had to be short. So short that months passed before Emilia even realized it had happened, though we must hope that Caroline knew before she closed her eyes for the last time.

When Caroline Sydney died, the people at her bedside did not even know her name. But her death was not entirely unmarked by an impassive universe. If nothing else, her passing left a gap. Where Caroline had been, now there was a void, and that void needed to be filled. Because the universe does not allow emptiness. Whatever is available, whether anticipated or unexpected, desired or undesirable, whatever is at hand, that is what comes flooding in.

When that happens, something begins. Maybe no one notices at first. The pendulum of Time, like a spider’s bound prey, swings back and forth above the void. But far, far down in that dark emptiness, something new begins to grow.

London, England

November 1818

On a gray morning in early November, there was only one passenger, a woman, waving from the deck of the merchant ship *Crocodile* as it pulled away from the dock. After months of indecision about this trip, the woman had recklessly made a choice. Since her mother in London was not expected to live much longer, she wanted to complete a rather singular search for her sake. Therefore, quite suddenly, she decided she needed to go to Cornwall, and she didn't care what vessel took her there. The *Crocodile* had scheduled a stop at Penzance, to load tin. They would also discharge the woman, their only passenger, before sailing straight south to the port of Gijon, Spain.

By terrible coincidence, an early winter storm of mythic intensity came barreling out of the North Sea, heading in the same direction. The woman passenger had sailed through storms before, but this time she was frightened. She knew she would not rest easy until she was standing on Cornish soil. She simply had to get to Penzance.

She heard the captain call for all hands. She could sense uneasiness among the crew. But the captain insisted they could stay ahead of the storm, so they ran before the wind under full sail. The woman pulled her cloak close about her. But when the freezing rain started, the heaving deck became so slippery she could barely find a footing. She retreated to her cabin and left the frantic sailors to battle the storm.

The wind beat about the *Crocodile*. Soon every spar, every shroud and cable became encased with ice. The crew fought to maintain their heading but the struggle was exhausting.

The stubborn captain finally relented. He shouted to the crew to lower everything but a staysail.

But by then the pulleys had frozen and nothing would move.

The weight of the ice-covered canvas made the *Crocodile* top-heavy and they lost two good men trying to bring her into Plymouth. They battled to keep control of her and prayed that they would find some sliver of sand along the coast where they

could run her aground. But she broached off Cawsands and three more worthy crewmen slid into the icy sea. The ship tossed and drifted helplessly until somehow, by sheer good luck, the north wind heaved her into the tiny harbor at Porthcoombe. She careened between the headlands and through the narrow harbor entrance without too much damage. The remaining crew didn't even have time to count their blessings, though, when they saw before them, right in the middle of the harbor, a menacingly tall slab of rock. At full speed, the *Crocodile* collided with it, smashed right up against it, and half her hull was torn asunder.

It was feared that all hands were lost.

As always when there was a ship in distress along this treacherous coast, villagers from miles around wasted no time. They had already begun to gather, to watch the sad sight, to help in any way they could. Or to plunder, as circumstances allowed. The raging wind carried back no answer to their shouted halloos. There seemed to be no one left alive.

It was a tragedy. And, it cannot be denied, a windfall for the villagers. They set to work. By evening, anyone searching the harbor would be hard-pressed to find a board, even so much as a button, belonging to the *Crocodile* or her crew.

Meanwhile, high above Porthcoombe harbor, in the oakwood at the top of the coombe, Emilia Mesola, aged fifteen, paused to catch her breath. She had been running, almost blinded by the pouring rain, and was soaking wet. She leaned against the ancient oak they called the Passage Oak. It was a huge tree, an enormous tree, the only oak of its kind left in that forest. It had been a landmark down the ages, for lovers and outlaws, tradesmen and smugglers. Under the Passage Oak, Emilia huddled to collect her scattered wits, and for shelter from the wind and the icy rain, before attempting the descent through the woods to the village.

The clap of thunder startled her. She had heard tales of oak trees drawing lightning to themselves. Then Emilia realized this was not thunder she was hearing, but the boom of a cannon. A signal. Shipwreck! As curious as anyone when disasters occur, she crossed the bridge over tumultuous Gwill Brook and slipped and slid down the steep path to the village.

She stumbled through their back gate and into the garden. Their house, at the top of Narrow Lane, had a bird's-eye view of

the harbor. And there she saw it, the wounded ship lying on its side, brutal waves bashing it again and again against the great fang of rock, Karrek Fekyl. The deceitful two-faced rock: a dangerous obstacle and yet a protective breakwater that calmed the surf in Porthcoombe pool. Beyond Karrek Fekyl, beyond the headlands that formed a lopsided horseshoe around their harbor, the heartless sea still beat against the high granite cliffs.

Emilia, half walking and half sliding, made it all the way down to Chapel Street before she thought of blankets. The shipwrecked crew in their wet clothing would need blankets desperately. She considered turning back but seeing the size of the crowds along the harbor, she figured that by now the survivors were probably enjoying the welcome warmth of cottage fires. If there were any survivors.

The slipway was jammed with people, despite the icy rain. Men held fast to their hats and women's skirts billowed in the wind. Small children huddled against older sisters, mothers clutched babies under their shawls.

Emilia squeezed past the batsmen. Their faces grim, they hardly noticed her, every particle of their concentration focused on the cliff tops, watching for greedy customs officers. The batsmen guarded a line of wagons that was ranged along the uphill path to the road. The oxen and horses waited, heads hanging, wondering what madness required all this standing about in nasty wind and icy rain.

Emilia worked her way through the crowd, down to the water's edge. No one spoke to her and she didn't expect to be greeted. For one thing, every single person was busy, frantically busy. Men splashed into the water to haul barrels and crates ashore. They quickly crowbarred them open to see what was inside, and then sorted them onto wagons.

The vicar and a local squire were shouting at each other, arguing about whether the contraband should be hidden in the vaults under the church floor or in the squire's barns. Wherever the loot ended up, it had to be stowed away quickly or it would be confiscated by the customs men.

Older children ran about, bent nearly to the ground looking for small treasure, squabbling like seagulls over broken shoe buckles or giddy with the prize of a silver coin. There were even people hanging precariously on the rock cliffs, making a grab for any booty floating in Porthcoombe pool. Gaggles of women were sorting through piles of clothing, distributing jackets and boots

according to strict local custom that only they could interpret. Emilia ducked out of the way to avoid two matrons, life-long neighbors and both of them spitting-mad, yanking fistfuls of hair and tearing at each other's shawls in a dispute over some choice pair of trousers.

Emilia almost tripped over the former occupant of the trousers. Dead, he and his fellows lay on the cold wet ground, heaped rather carelessly and completely naked. It wasn't lack of respect, really. Now that the villagers knew there were no survivors of the tragedy, they regarded this shipwreck as their possession. A cornucopia of loot. The booty must be secured before the customs officers showed up. The dead had no say in the matter. They would have to wait.

Everyone wanted a share of the hoard. They would pick the *Crocodile's* bones clean, right down to the last rib. This was allowed, not exactly by law, but by an old code of maritime conduct that took effect only if all hands had been lost. If there were survivors, that would change everything. Well, it was supposed to make a difference. Would a lone survivor or two be safe from avaricious villagers? Truth be told, wicked threats, even murders, had been known to make true the claim of "no survivors", but the people of Porthcoombe were never tempted to go quite that far. They prided themselves on that. Why, had not two of their own young men lost their lives just last year, attempting to reach a wreck that had hung up on the Gazelles to the north of here? Yes, the people of Porthcoombe had paid their dues to English law many, many times over. And the voracious sea very often took from them what little was left. They had given up their sons, their husbands and fathers. What more could England ask? The devil could snatch away those corrupt English customs officers and hardly a soul in Cornwall would care.

As for the tales of ships lured by pirate lights onto dangerous reefs so they could be stripped clean, well, that had certainly never happened here. Almost surely. Not for a long time, or as far as anyone was willing to remember, anyway. Even Emilia, who saved very little room in her heart for these villagers, even she could not imagine such a thing happening in Porthcoombe.

She had seen enough of tragedy for one day. She was about to turn away when her eye was caught by a movement over at the far edge of the pool, beyond the Karrek Fekyl rock, out beneath the sheer granite cliff.

"Look!" she cried. Hardly anyone heard her, much less paid her

any mind. "Out there! A woman!" Emilia stumbled into the churning waves, arms held wide for balance. She searched for footholds, trying to work her way along the steep cliffs at the edge of the cove. The rocks were treacherously slippery. She must get out there. If only someone would help! She waded deeper.

"Ooo! Mind you don't get that dress wet there, Emma!" cawed one of the fishermen's wives.

"Or those bee-oo-ti-fool boots!" jeered another.

"What's out there?"

"Yeah, what's she after, anyway?"

"Who?"

"That brown one. That Emma."

"It's Eh-MEE-lee-ah, if ya please."

"Stupid name. Foreigner's name. I call her Emma."

"Will someone tell me why she's out there scramblin' for bits of things?"

"Aye, ain't we the ones what need them bitses? It's us that are the ones in real need, ain't that so?"

"She surely don't need fer nothin', that one. Miss Fancy Pants."

"Hey, lookit! She's right, though. There is a survivor."

"Crimey!"

"What's that woman out there got hold of? A spar or something?"

"There's some bad luck. Now she's going to ruin everything for the rest of us."

"Ain't it just like that Emma to find trouble? I hate that brown witch."

The women watched, disgusted, pairs of hands on sturdy hips.

"Well, there goes a whole entire day of hard work."

"Can't ya just leave things be?" one woman called to Emilia.

"Well, hold up here, old dolls. You think maybe we should oughta do somethin' to help?"

"Naa. Should we?"

"It is only right. Poor woman, out there freezing."

"Naw, it's too late."

"Don't bother. That woman's gonna be half dead anyways."

"Aye, she's been too long in that cold water, most likely."

Emilia heard many of their remarks but, for once, didn't bother with a retort. She was up to her waist in freezing water now, bracing against the waves, trying to reach the woman who fumbled clumsily against the rocks while the sea sucked and pulled around her.

“Wait! I’m coming!” Emilia shouted to her. “Help me, someone! There’s a woman out there!”

Finally all activity quieted. All eyes watched Emilia the way a crowd, holding its breath, gawks at a tightrope walker. A low growl began among the young men and more than one hand went to the hilt of a knife. If any were inspired to help Emilia, they looked nervously to their fellows and dared not move. Turn your heads away, gents. A lone survivor might be better left to drown.

Emilia, stiffening with cold, sloshed clumsily along the edge of the pool. The waves had heaved the woman, clinging to the spar, closer to the granite wall. She saw Emilia now. She stretched a desperate hand to her. Emilia stumbled, lost her footing and slid underwater. The woman floundered toward her. Emilia came up thrashing and choking bitter cold sea water. Now they were closer together. Emilia grabbed hold of the spar. She clung to it and they both rode a swell that pushed them closer to the cliff. Emilia found a foothold, a place where she could climb up. She felt the urgency to be quick but nothing would force her chilled arms and legs to move faster. She was shaking uncontrollably. She knelt and reached a hand down to the woman.

Then Emilia heard a scrambling behind her. Strong hands pulled her aside. Sébastien Roland waded onto the ledge and grasped the woman’s upper arms. Her skirts were heavy, sodden with seawater. She was so exhausted and confused that she could do little to help herself. Sébastien managed to reach under her arms. Linking his hands across her back, he dragged her, only half conscious, onto the ledge. Emilia wept with relief. By now, others were sliding down to help. Roddy Campion grasped Emilia’s arm. It took several men to carry the woman and Emilia up to safe footing.

Someone brought blankets and a stretcher. The woman could barely stand. As her muscles lost functionality, they allowed a surge of warm blood to pass from her core to her extremities. This new warmth convinced her that she was overheating. She tore at her clothes. She fought at the men who tried to wrap her in blankets. Sébastien had to hold her arms so they could tie her onto the stretcher. Then slowly they inched their way down the path to the street.

Emilia huddled on the sidelines with her teeth chattering uncontrollably. She pulled a blanket tight around herself. She was shaking so violently she had to pick her way very slowly down the steep path. But a little cloud of satisfaction buoyed her. She,

Emilia, had helped to save the lady! They say that if you save someone's life, it creates a bond of friendship. That would be nice, very nice for a change. She would like that. Given her present troubles, and given the horrible things that had happened today, yes, it certainly would feel good to be able to bond with somebody. Already, Emilia imagined that she could sense it, this connection. She hoped fervently that the lady would be all right. She looked up to see Sébastien Roland gesturing to her.

"You'd better get some dry clothes on," he yelled over the wind. "You look frozen."

She stumbled toward him. "You helped that lady. Thank you." Emilia realized she hadn't spoken civilly to Sébastien in a long time. Her mood was so buoyant, she decided that perhaps she should make it a point to speak to him later. At the moment, though, she could hardly form her words. Shivering, she pulled the blanket up around her blue lips.

"You'll get on home then?" he called over his shoulder as he headed back to help with the stretcher. "Get some dry clothes on."

"Where?" Emilia shouted after him. She was too muddled to think of the right words. "Where are you taking her?"

He turned with a show of minor impatience. "Dr. Campion's, I should think." He paused and took a step back toward her. "I must say, you surprised everyone." Emilia felt a small smile bubbling to the surface. "You, of all people. Our Emilia, acting the hero."

Her smile sank. Fell into a pit of acid. Disintegrated. "I wasn't acting the hero. That's not why I did it."

"Don't get huffy. I just meant that you showed more spunk than most people give you credit for."

"You all thought I'd let her drown? Thanks so much, Sébastien." One more thing, now, to add to this horrible day.

"I didn't say that."

"You could give me a little credit for saving her life, you know."

"If you would stop bristling like a sea urchin, you would see that I have been trying to."

"It didn't sound like that to me. You were just trying to" Her mind was too thick to cope with what he was saying. "I hope you choke on fish bones. All of you."

Sébastien laughed. "There we go. There's that old chip on the shoulder."

Crushed, weary, Emilia was too tired to keep hot tears from welling up. But she would eat the nose off a dead rat if ever again she let Sébastien see her shed a single tear. She bundled the

blanket close around her face and pushed past him.

He stood for a moment, looking after her, his own feelings a welter of confusion.

No one else paid any attention to Emilia. She squeezed her way through the crowd just as the batsmen were forming their double row. The wagons trundled between them, loaded and overloaded, finally on their way to the manor house. The guards smacked their bats against the palms of their hands, grim as a school of sharks. If there were customs men hiding along the path, waiting until everything was loaded to make their move, they would have to fight half the village to get their hands on anything.

Meanwhile, many smaller battles had played themselves out and hardly anyone went home empty-handed. The vicar, though, had lost his argument with the squire. The barrels were not going to be hidden under the church floor. They were heading for the squire's barns after all. The Reverend Vingout, a staunch Methodist, nevertheless gestured with surprising rudeness to the squire and jumped aboard a wagon that groaned under heavy casks of whiskey. He grasped the arm of the wagon driver and hollered over the noise of the storm.

"That squire!" he fumed. "He is slippery as a dew snail. You and I, we'll have to keep an eye on those barrels."

As empty carts took the place of those full of contraband, the bodies of the dead crewmen drew some guilty looks. Something had to be done with them. A few men grudgingly lifted them by arms and legs and placed them on a cart so small that the naked bodies had to be piled on top of each other. But what choice did they have? All the large wagons were needed for more important cargo. Since no evidence had been found that any of the dead were Christian, they would not risk burying them in the churchyard. A couple of the old men would have to haul them down to some small cove and bury them, eventually, in a mass grave.

Emilia, a little sickened at the sight, hurried past. In her foggy-headed haste, she stumbled against a couple of sturdy fishwives.

"Hey, watch yourself!" snapped a woman.

"Brown witch!" muttered another.

Emilia slipped in the muck along the shoreline and just caught herself from falling.

"Sorry!" she said.

"Out of the way! You think you own this place?" one of the women challenged.

"Are you joking? I wouldn't give you two pence for this hole!"

Emilia spit back. She glared, pulled her wet skirts close and shoved on past them.

The ice had gone out of the rain but the road was slippery with mud. She was slow making her way up the hill and along Narrow Lane to the doctor's house, across the street from her own. Bess Campion opened the door to her knock.

"The lady?" Emilia blurted. "Is she here?"

"Yes, they brought her in a little while ago. Come inside."

"Is she going to be all right?"

"Come in, my dear. Out of the rain. Hurry! You're soaked to the skin. Yes, Dr. Campion is examining her right now and I'm filling a pan of coals for her bed. Look at you! You're drenched. Why don't you go put on some dry clothes and then come back? I'll have a nice pot of tea ready for you."

"I would like to see her, Mrs. Campion, to talk to her for a minute."

"When you're dry, love. I don't want you catching your death, now, do I?"

"I'll be fine."

"No, it's important to get out of those wet things, Emilia. Besides, there's hardly any sense in trying to talk to her yet. She doesn't even know what she's saying at the moment. We can't make any sense out of her. Be quick, now! Go home and change clothes. I'll put the kettle on."

In a short time, Emilia was back. She knocked several times and then let herself in.

"Mrs. Campion?" Emilia tapped lightly on the bedroom door. "Mrs. Campion?"

Bess came to the door. "Come in, come in. It's all right, isn't it, Rafe?" she asked her husband. "Can Emilia come in for just a minute?"

"Yes, yes. Emilia, pull those rocks out of the fire and bring them in here. Give her something to wrap them in, Bess."

They nestled warm rocks along the lady's sides. They had managed to get her wet clothes off her. She wore one of Bess's white nightgowns.

Emilia leaned over her. The lady's eyes were vague, unfocused.

Emilia tried to put herself in the lady's view. "How are you feeling?"

The lady's eyes widened and she blinked rapidly, trying to focus.

"Are you nice and warm now?" Emilia smiled at her and now

the eyes seemed glued to her as she sat down beside the bed.

Dr. Rafe Campion stood watching his patient. "This is about all that I can do for her, I'm afraid," he said.

"She'll live, won't she?" whispered Emilia.

The doctor looked meaningfully at Emilia. How could he speak negative words in front of a patient? "She'll be just fine," he said soberly. He touched the lady's arm. "You rest for now. I'll come to see you in a little while."

Bess Campion left to make tea. The doctor had to go down to the harbor to set a broken arm for one of the treasure hunters who had slipped on the rocks. Emilia sat alone by the bed.

She touched the lady's hand. It was ice cold, and no wonder. Emilia hadn't been immersed in seawater nearly as long and she was still shivering. She slipped off her boots and crawled under the blankets. She put her arm around the woman and held her tight so she could share her warmth. Their heads on the same pillow, their eyes still locked, Emilia thought the lady smiled at her before she closed her eyes.

Bess Campion came in with a tray. "You should drink some hot tea, Emilia. You must have caught quite a chill yourself."

"In a minute."

The tea was stone cold by the time Emilia rose from the bed. The lady was alarmingly still. Emilia felt for a pulse. Nothing. She ran to the bedroom door.

"Mrs. Campion?" she hollered. "Can you come in here? Something's gone wrong. Quick! I don't think she's breathing!"

They tried what they could to rouse her, Emilia becoming more frantic as each attempt failed. Bess even tried slapping her. No response. She lowered the lady gently back to the bed.

"I suppose this is her time to go." Bess took Emilia's arm and spoke quietly. "Let her be, Emilia. Come on. Come sit by the fire. There is nothing you can do for her now."

"No! We can't let her go! Try giving her some tea!" She struggled to lift the woman to a sitting position. "Help me! She needs warm tea!"

"She's gone, sweetcake, can't you see?"

"No! No, we can wake her up!" Emilia shook the lady. "Do something for her! What can we do?"

"There is nothing we can do. She is beyond our help." Mrs. Campion pulled gently on Emilia's shoulders.

"Wait! Don't give up! Please, please!" Emilia chafed the lady's hand. "Get more warm rocks. Is she breathing now? Did you see

that? I saw her take a breath.” She started to cry. “Help her, Mrs. Campion. Can’t you do something? Please!” she sobbed.

Bess Campion pried Emilia away. She crossed the lady’s bluish hands over her breast and pulled the sheet up over her still face.

“Noo!” wailed Emilia.

“It’s no use.” She turned Emilia’s wet face toward her and made her listen. “She is gone from this life. You cannot hold her here.”

“I’ll go get Doctor Campion.” She struggled with her boots. “He will help her!”

“No. You must believe me. She is beyond our help.” She pulled Emilia’s head to her shoulder and rocked her like a baby.

When Emilia’s tears finally quieted, Bess Campion led her to a seat by the fire. “You did your best. Sébastien was here when they brought the lady in. He said you did your best for her.” She laid a gentle hand on Emilia’s head. “Don’t trouble yourself so.”

Emilia looked unseeing into the flames, consumed by the strangest feeling of loss.

“She must have been a gentlewoman,” Mrs. Campion continued. “Look, her clothes are lovely, aren’t they?” She shook the garments where they dripped beside the fire, heavy with seawater. “She was wearing this little gold cross. I wondered if you would like to have it?”

Emilia shrugged and shook her head. “No.” She paused. “Wait. Yes. Yes, I would like to have it.” She studied the fine gold chain Bess dropped onto her palm. “Thank you.”

“I hope you don’t blame yourself, my girl. That water is deadly cold. It’s a wonder she stayed conscious for as long as she did. When the blood is cold for so long, the body just shuts down.” She rose and filled Emilia’s teacup. “Were there any children among the dead?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Because she was calling for her daughter. What foul weather to be out in. I wonder where she was going.”

Seeing as how the lady was a Christian, they buried her in the churchyard at St. Buryan’s. They found no article on her person with a name on it. Nothing at all to identify her. So only a rock marked the spot where she lay. A rock and a little clump of wild rose that Emilia planted for her.