

Phantom Maternal: The Text

Chapter One

I'm watching my surroundings cautiously. Every individual walking into my frame of view is causing my heart to thump irregularly. My legs start to swing ever so slightly as I wait on this cold and, not to mention, wirey metal bench while feeling the intrusive stare of an elderly woman sitting a few seats away. She's hot on my ear. I turn to peek, and her stare is, indeed, stamped onto me. Indented cheeks with a pursed lip are cause to unsettle and I snap my head forward and from now on, decide to keep it there. As a small sigh escapes my even smaller mouth, I decide to keep my focus on the colourless concrete filling the ground underneath. In this unfamiliar and scavenging place, I try to block out the various disassembled footsteps, the hisses of steam and bursts of static on the speaker system crackling above, the repetitive ice-picking squeak from the hunched lady dragging her wheelie bag across the rusted floor. She was struggling, and I suddenly wondered if my mother was struggling the same way. We got separated you see, at a small lone station in the middle of nowhere where the red bricks seemed coarser than any other and the air seemed less breathable with every pant in my chest.

It happened as we were making a transfer. While I was quite comfortably holding my mother's hand, as all sensible ten-year-olds should, a busying man with a gruff of hair atop his lip cut between us in a flurry of dramatics, yelling "MOVE! I'm in a HURRY!" as he jumbled his way through the already jumbling crowd, briefcase flying above my head. Now, I'm only ten, so not quite experienced with the general populous as of yet, but one would expect a little more 'pleases' or 'thank yous' when throwing children from their mothers' grasps. Or is it that those with actual manners don't, in fact, 'throw' and rather 'carefully manoeuvre'? Whichever it is, I have no interest. It doesn't change the fact that I want my mother back by my side. She is far away by now I expect and I have to bravely travel the distance without her.

As soon as our hands separated, I got lost between a thousand coats and scarves and was finally swung away from the crowd by a young man who delayed his questions to scan the station around us, probably for someone else to handle a dazed ten-year-old. My mother, to my utter terror, got swept in the other direction, being packed onto this linear yellow and silver-striped carriage, stacked behind others who didn't seem to notice her panic and complete agony from seeing my little ice-blue puffer drifting away. With the train clunking softly down the tracks and the heavy carriage doors cutting the airspace between us, powerless is what she probably felt, right? And me? I nervously gazed into the eyes of my new friend Jacob as he called over a station attendant.

I was thankful for the concern layering over him. My mother was just whipped away, but people were lining up to care and aid me. However, I realised soon after the chorus of situational retellings with new and exchanging staff members that this attention had a short lifespan. As we now know, I promptly got seated on this damp bench with a creepy old lady, as the staff searched for a suitable employee to handle this teensy, yet well dressed, issue. I hope I don't stay here for long, this station is giving me nothing but dead energy and the whispering static I

can hear from the speaker doesn't make anything of this more calming. The footsteps, the hissing, the squeaking. All of it is stimulating in the worst way possible.

My legs are still swinging below, and my head has dipped slightly from its original good-postured position. The disarray in my emotional state continues to grow and I believe it's the one whisper above all else that is forcing me into a subdued curl, making me want to do nothing else but bring my knees up to my chest and hug at my shins. It's coming from above. The speaker which is haphazardly screwed into the station wall. The speaker that has rust lining its shadows and mesh coming away at the edges. A sound so delicately quiet I'm hearing it as a lie. Tell me, why am I hearing this shiver-worthy noise directly on the back of my neck? And why does it have to say such obscure things? How on earth can I hear it so clearly like it's spoken word right against my ear? My eyes start to crease as the whisper seemingly breathes closer, and my eyes close as it becomes too concealing. In my head, I think briefly of it like one anticipates an object flying towards you. A flinch, bracing for impact. I really want my mother. Can I have her back now please?

"George."

I jump out of my seat, my left arm stumbling from its grip over the edge of the bench and my torso stumbling downwards as my spine whips forward. In unexpected shock, I collect my bones and pile them back to a postured seat, glaring at the two station attendants who are now standing over me, one with perplexion and the other... an expression void of surprise. The member of staff that disappeared some seven minutes ago to find someone suitable gives a daisy introduction to who they've brought.

"This is Francie, she's going to take care of you for now... and take you on the next train to where your mother is waiting."

I gawk at the newly appointed 'Francie' and wonder if this is the projectile to my flinch. No matter how briefly distracted I am by how playful her name sounds, I still have time to give my fifth ex-carer a glance of thanks. My blank and unsure expression registers a certainly eerie response from Francie who only gives me a warm, slightly too warm, smile as consequence. She slowly unhooks her right arm from fold to shake my own. I shake out of courtesy like my mother taught me and withdraw sufficiently in perfect form. If I'm going to be with her for the foreseeable future, I must make a worthy impression.

"Well... I'll leave you two together now, only a few minutes to go."

The third wheeler is left with awkward silence and with no care for the situation anymore, rolls their eyes to stand and walk back to their post. I avoid Francie's eyes altogether. I can feel she doesn't avoid mine. This incessancy keeps me on edge, but neither of us strikes a further conversation. We end up staring out onto the tracks in waiting. After a few minutes, I give a little

peep and catch her side profile, muted red hair, sombre style, long grey coat... I look to the tracks again.

There's something that feels unordinary, and I notice it more this time. Mind you, I haven't been to many stations before so I can't tell if this is the general instance they give, but it's so incredibly bleak and plain apart from the red brick of the main building. Over by the tracks, I spot a small notice board but nothing else. Compared to the last station we were in, this seems as dismal as art class. What was it called again? Kings Cro-

"All right?"

My eyes dart left, craning my neck to look at Francie who, for the very second time, spoke. Her voice holds such a different power than what I initially thought, but the tone of it doesn't match what would normally be appropriate for the phrase. 'All right?' A common phrase for the middle class according to my favourite English tutor: one expects a jovial and questioning tone, but hers came out more like a shotgun statement. A disinterested one at that. Oh no, it quite drastically dawned on me that she isn't happy about the task that's been appointed to her, is she?

Before I let concern carry my thoughts away, a faint but slowly growing train horn was winding its way into the station and everyone paused to lift their heads. One by one, peering to the tracks where dances of light beams started to play, the horn grew louder. Is this for me? It sounds colossal, like the sound you'd hear before stumbling upon a nautical war. Rattling, reverberating, flooding into my head like if someone didn't hear it the whole building would be swallowed up beneath us. It's a deep symphony, like a fanfare announcing that the king of trains has arrived. How exciting.

Francie stepped forward and outstretched her hand for me to take, and while I'm intrigued by her, I wouldn't say I'd want to hold her hand just yet. The hesitation on my part makes her shake her hand into place, enforcing that she's not asking. I take it and immediately feel the cold of her skin press against mine, a surprising sensation, one that she doesn't let me retaliate from. My hand stays limp, hers firm. I guess she's on orders to not lose me. The horn of the train dissipates and is instead replaced by a heavy and steel-working chug, whatever this train was, it sounded magnificent. My skin started to prickle with anticipation, hearing the clunk and whirr of mechanical freedom working its way around the track bend and into the station tunnel. It was so loud and so invigorating that I could almost see the train come around the corner. Every second it waited and lingered to show itself, I grew more and more eager.

The chugs were now accompanied by a soft hiss, and a high-pitched scrape of some kind, with wisps of steam bellowing from around the brick tunnel wall. I took an eager step forward that I couldn't help and Francie followed suit by leading me towards the tracks with broad strides. I soon caught up to her with a light jog, but kept on further, for I could see the silhouette of this amalgamation coming down the station tunnel. It was like nothing I ever had the perspective to

imagine, a completely different machine from what I was ever meant to see. It was giant. It was loud. It most definitely was a king.

Chapter Two: 3D

Black screen, train whistle fades in

Cut scenes of the train pulling into the station, chug chug chug, hiss

Fade to black, Chapter Two, fade.

/

Cut scene of George with dialogue,

“How long until we get there?”

“Sit tight. This thing looks like it won't be going at any sufficient speed.”

” ... ”

“Is there a toilet?”

“Should be at the back”

fade to black with controls,

Fade into fps.

/

When player goes to the loo it says it's locked and can't be opened

“Maybe I don't need to go...”

The carriage then rattles around and George hides under the bar.

“Let's sit back down, it's too bumpy to stand.”

Player will probably go back to the carriage and sit down.

FPS is disabled.

The train starts to rapidly speed up with a screeching sound and rumbling

The train brakes harshly and George falls forward.

Black shadow in field.

“Stay here. I'm going to see the driver. I'm telling you. Don't. Move”

Door opening and closing noise

Fade out, End of Chapter Two.

Chapter Three

I join the back of my knees to the seat, my heart plummeting in short bouts. This train is either broken or about to go off its rails from how it keeps braking at inoperable speeds. My eyes dart around the carriage as I am now left alone and I try to organise my thoughts without dwelling on the one cluster forming in my head. It turns out I can't avoid it. What was that massive entity in the field? Is it still there? My imagination must be in overdrive after that incident, because whatever I just saw, it most definitely was not human or any form of nature, but what if... No, no way about it. Whatever that was, it was too terrifying to be allowed entry into this world. I anxiously wonder if Francie is getting any answers from the train driver. From the way she dashed off in steely determination, I'm sure they won't resist giving her some answers.

As I cascade my view around the carriage repeatedly, the orange glow of the evening lights cast shadows on every corner of the decor, making the interior darker and smaller than I once knew.

Hold on, orange glow? I'm sure it didn't look like this when I first sat down, the original sleek, albeit old and peeling, furnishing is now noticeably velvet, the trimmings an oak wood and the electric lamps now tall wavering sconces in ornate holders. I pause all thought and gawp at the changed surroundings, my eyes wide with interrogation as I scan the carriage roof, window trims, table doilies and plump seat cushions. I certainly did not see this amount of lace when I first got on. It's as if the train smacked into some kind of wormhole, in which we were brought back to a time when using oil burners next to wooden structures seemed appropriate. I'm not exactly sure what period that would be, but according to the history textbooks we use at school, and I mean the ones with thick edges and splayed, soft corners, trains with these furnishings are indeed very, very old.

Something's definitely wrong, even more so than when I was at the station. How can the interior change? I can't quite believe what I'm seeing, but if this is how it looks in reality, what did I see when I first got on the train? None of this makes theoretical sense. And what? I have to sit in this deformative time capsule and wait for Francie to come back? I very suddenly became aware of my insecurity with this situation and it gave a sharp edge to my spine, the stillness and quiet of it all seeming incredibly apparent. The air is much colder, the night is much darker and the burning light is becoming increasingly menacing as the shadows around the table quiver. Am I truly alone here? It doesn't feel so.

The silence continues as I wait for the seconds to pass. Francie wasn't much of a talker before, but at least her sighs and grumbles gave some signs of life. This cabin feels devoid of, well, anything. The urge to stand and find another human being is becoming too much for my ten-year-old mental capabilities to resist, but I fight it as much as I can. Francie gave me clear orders to stay put. Twice in the same sentence if that's not more convincing. However, before I could contemplate to move or not to move any more, a breath of unnerving air brushed over my shoulder from the back of the cabin and it took me three slow seconds to turn clockwise. Call it nerves, or panic, but I expected to see a humongous dark hand swooping towards me, namely from that eerie figure I saw looming in the field. Nothing was behind me. That dark presence isn't leaving my mind any time soon. All I saw was the end of the cabin, in its new gothic splendour and whimpering light, the door I previously walked through a completely different shade of brown and carved in sharp edges.

I shook my head in utter despair. Trains don't change. They don't transform from one style to another. Their lights don't change between energy forms. I was set in my misunderstanding, but for a brief childish moment, I wondered if they did and I was just inexperienced with this mode of transportation. No, of course they don't. They can't. So how? Maybe I was having one of those 'episodes' that Auntie Kathryn was mentioning the other day at supper. I'm sure if my mother was here she would know what was going on. She wouldn't be wildly speculating about what evil or conceptual force was trying to rip this train apart. She would be making a plan, calming me down, talking to those she could.

My chest rose and fell quickly, the same questions repeating themselves over and over in my mind like a merry-go-round, a carousel of confusion since all the thoughts were similar but still,

all different horses, trotting away and then returning of my own self-doubt's volition. Despite the interior now seeming like it could burn down by candlelight at any moment, I reminded myself of how the train actually is, how it looked when it first pulled into the station: the tonnes of iron and steel lining its tanked frame and roaring engine, the smoke bellowing through the tunnel into plumes under lamp light, the mighty horn of kings that filled my ears before it emerged around the corner. It is a mighty machine, one that wouldn't be swayed by a bit of shadow or weather and certainly not burnt down by its own light.

I took a deep breath, in, and out, over, four times. Some were choppy but they will have to do. I came to realise that no amount of thinking, or breathing, would ever solve what questions I had. I'm sorry Francie, I'm going to disobey your orders, both of them. I can't stay here. I must move.

Chapter Four: 3D

Fade to black, Chapter Four with controls, fade in

FPS is regained

Player can walk to the front carriage and open the doors and see the black figure outside on the connection deck.

Can go into the front carriage where things are beeping and switching.

Cutscenes of the interior.

/

FPS regained

If player goes to sit down in the drivers seat, FPS is disabled and the dialogue plays:

"George! I told you to stay put."

"Sorry, I didn't want to be by myself..."

"Were you always in here? Oh it doesn't matter, I've looked outside and around the train but I can't find the driver anywhere-"

Train engine starts up and the train begins to move

Fade to black, end of chapter four.

Chapter Five

"What is happening? Did you touch something?"

We both take a few moments to watch our spaces, as the train engine starts to gurgle to life of its own volition. We meet eyes, and I know Francie is just as clueless as me in this fiasco. I didn't touch too much in here, but whatever I did, I woke it up. Without the driver here, we have no hope of figuring out how to regain pace and get anywhere with signs of life. Being stuck here, stopping in this forested wasteland, is as good as being lost forever. The driver knew it, and I think Francie knows too. There's something sinister living here.

The copper pipes and various instruments in the cockpit hum and slither, their glowing displays and readings beeping to each other as the vibrations from the engine bellow and rise in building fashion. I look out the front window and see nothing but cascades of blackness, save a few

shadows of the forest. There are no stars to be seen in the sky and for some reason all I can do is picture that black figure lunging itself over the train, blocking out the light and smothering us from the sight of the outside. Francie takes action and marches to the front, her hands stable on the back of the driver's chair and the dashboard in front, peering outside as if trying to deduce the same questions as I. I watch her, hoping she has a plan further than I do. I have none, of course, that was never my job it was my mother's. I might not have had a particularly warm perspective of Francie at first but right now she is the only person I can rely on, the only adult in sight let alone the only human I have contact with. I wonder if she found anything outside.

"Did you see anything?"

She turns briefly over her shoulder to glance at my worried little state.

"See what?"

I rub my thumbs together at my front and my shoulders cave inwards, feeling increasingly claustrophobic in this head of a machine, its churns and plunges growing heavier by the minute.

"Anything outside... a big... black..."

Francie fully turns with an ominous expression, I don't think she knows what I'm talking about. This might have freaked her out even more than the massive handprint on the window she was just gawping at. I think it's safe to say her job of looking after me got derailed. This was probably not her job to do either. The staff of 'those who accidentally got left' might have been sick today.

If Francie didn't see it, then was it even real? Did I see some spectre or the devil himself? My shoulders were shuddering at the thought, to which Francie gave a glance as if I was being possessed. I look out the small door window, peering at the outside, to the forest of shades which I really, desperately, wanted to avoid. Nothing. Absolutely nothing. The train was fully thrumming with power now and beyond its constant frequency, I couldn't hear any outside noise. Not the howling wind, not the hisses from the field. That's sure helping this feeling of isolation.

"I couldn't find the driver, and he's obviously not here... Let's just go back to our cabin and see if he's anywhere else, okay?"

Francie made no waste of authority as she stood at my side, placing a small hand on my back. She must know I'm scared as she opens the door to the connector platform outside and graciously takes a step first, letting the cold air brush against her as she guides me, or rather, pushes me onto the platform and firmly slams the cockpit door shut. While the cockpit is strange and seems to have an intention of its own, it is awfully cut off from the exposure of the night compared to everywhere else. Being stuffy and warm and smelling a bit like gas doesn't give it many perks, but if it means avoiding whatever's lurking in this black, I would have stayed. At least for a few hours. Or until sunrise. Or until we were rescued.

Without warning, Francie makes a beeline for the cabin door opposite, and I can't help but notice that she refuses to look anywhere else but the cabin interior. Her eyes are set forward, her gaze low with her chin dropped. Was she avoiding looking at the surroundings as I wish to as well? Wait, did she perhaps see something other than the big entity? Before I can get left a step behind, I launch myself forward as she opens the cabin door and shuffle in directly behind her, finding no space between us in a dramatic attempt to feel safe.

It reminds me of how I used to stick this close to my mother when she would try to leave the schoolyard the first week I started. Call it a child being nervous or scared, but it rather felt like there was a sudden gap in the ground between us, a chasm to jump in order to stay by her side as she stood on the opposing edge, a meek expression and a small, hesitant wave staring back. Without jumping, that gap looked to be forever uncrossable. At the time I wondered: Would I be jumping the gap to stay at my mother's side forever? Or will there come a time when I don't jump at all, where I see the gap and have to hold myself back? Needless to say, that week I jumped every day until she told me that I only needed to hold on for a few hours. After a few hours, I learned, the chasm would disappear. But this isn't a few hours, this feels like forever. I cannot wait forever.

"George?"

I look up at Francie as she swivels in place, wondering why I'm so closely packed in behind her, why my little hand is clasping the back of her tweed blazer, why my eyes seem a little glazed over as I choose to stare forward with no allowance for the around. I'm terrified. Not just of the figure in the field, but of never seeing my mother again. This gap between us is so large that it's taken me this long to realise that it may be uncrossable, possibly as endless and voided as the figure in the field.

Francie abruptly unhooked my grip on her and took me by the shoulders, a calm reproach wearing her as she started a sequence of calming me down. That would be what she had done, if she hadn't glanced at the half-open cabin door we had just come through to see a silent man standing on the connector platform outside. This man, whoever he is, stood in some kind of hunched form, his fingers splayed and his eyes drooping from their sockets. His face had hollowed like he had lost years of dining and had been lost, running around for weeks on end, his breath shallow and stomach-churningly raspy. I anticipated him acting like an undead, but he remained still standing. He stared emptily, and we in return with frozen fear.

As the seconds elapse, I curl my fist around the fabric of Francie's jacket, unsure what to do next, if I should even move. I didn't want to take my eyes off him, but I could feel Francie start to sway. My heart performed one large swing in my chest as Francie shot forward, being careful not to knock me down completely as she used one hand to stick me to her side and the other to smack the cabin door shut, the force rattling the furnishing and window frame. She made a small noise of relief as she clattered down the door to the interior lock, twisting until it became stiff and the skin on her fingers started to wring. Upon locking she immediately made haste and rushed back, an arm over my chest as we both sent frenzied glances up to the window,

watching the man as his gaze focused on where we were while remaining unfeeling. I stumbled backwards as the fright rushed out of my body, losing balance and leaning into the cabin seats behind me. As I felt the velvet cushion hit, I scrambled backwards, cocooning my vision until I saw Francie stepping backwards in careful consideration, still watching the man's insubordination of movement while I pressed my back against the cabin wall, feeling ridges of steel on my neck from the window seal behind. I felt my stomach cramp with adrenaline, and that's when I felt the steady chug of below, a slow cough of smoke and my vision dim darker and darker. Francie had backed away so far that I now could only watch the window on the opposite side of the carriage, and before I lost my consciousness, I saw a wave of shadow fall over the forest, it looked graceful but that was probably because time seemed to slow down when one passes out from fright.

It wasn't long before I opened my eyes again, only to be greeted with bright bars of light above me and a pinging sharpness in my skull. Conversations were muffled, but I could recognise the tone of my mother's voice anywhere. Pure heaven seemed to strike me, but I didn't jump for joy or scream in excitement, oh no. I let my body fall into the solidness of whatever structure I was lying on, tears streaming down my temples quietly as I squinted around and felt the security of being with her again. I don't know how I got to here, but I could only imagine scenarios of Francie heroically fighting off the subdued stranger while I lay docile in the cabin.

Francie. Where is she? This time I sat up, adjusting my back, my mother wrapping her frame around mine in pure love as I clung on inherently. My eyes sharpened and I saw myself in my home station, bright white lights, platforms galore, well and truly home. Several station attendants stood a few meters from us having a heated discussion, gestures flying, shaking their heads in full force. It was this that sent a bug through my gut. I scanned around using what little neck mobility I had from my mother's tight embrace and spotted the arrivals board alight with interchanging platforms and locations on a tight switch schedule. Despite not feeling fully awake yet, I tried earnestly to search for an arrival from...

My head dampened. What was the name of the place I had come from? My brain twitched and a fog blew through my memory. Everything is hazy and nonsensical, the train, the people, the cabin. I vaguely remember being frightened to death by something ominous, something colossal, something unreal. Francie! Where on earth is Francie?

"Mother..."

She released her embrace and took my head in her hands, oval eyes and pouched cheeks facing me. I was pushing away, looking in all directions and she caught my alarm, giving me some space while mimicking my behaviour in concern.

"What's wrong?"

"Where's the lady with the red hair?"

I continued to scan the station, but no matter how hard I looked I saw no long grey coat or red head. My mother sighed and stroked the side of my head, gaining my undivided attention as she remained kneeling in front of me.

“She went back to her job sweetie, why? Did you want to say thank you?”

I wanted to say a lot more than ‘thank you’. I wanted answers, I wanted confirmation that what I just went through wasn’t some parlour illusion or waking nightmare. For once there’s something I can’t explain to my mother because she wouldn’t understand. This in itself, gave me composure. Whatever it was out there, whatever train I came in on, had to be the experiences I saw. Even without Francie in sight to confirm it, I have to believe.

In a matter of minutes, my mother had bundled me up with our luggage in hand. She swiftly took me by the other with a firm grip this time, which did cut off my blood circulation after a while, and we started to peruse to the exit of the station. Little things triggered my memories as we sailed away, the chatter on the intercom which was loud and clear compared to the hushed static tormenting me before, and the solid footsteps on the polished stone floor compared to shrill squarks from suitcases on concrete. We came close to a tall stone arch marking the end of this journey, and before we entered the outside night I gave one last look to the station behind, in a sympathetic last attempt to spot Francie or the train. I saw neither. We walked away, and I left the chasm behind. I was now back by my mother’s side, and it didn’t take forever.

-end-