

The Bridges

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There is a body at the bottom of the river. It's been there for a while now. There are official markings telling us where not to swim and handmade signs that precede them, but it would be hard to reach her by accident. The woman is in a gulch with its own orbit, free from tides and currents, and everything living takes care to avoid her, like they can sense what lies beneath.

As we travel towards her, I sit back in the rowboat, holding my oar and swallowing my nerves. Beside me, my sister Evie stares out at the bank, her eyes unfocused and her arms hugging her waist. She's brushed her hair today, ending a summer-long strike, but not her teeth. At the bow, her boyfriend Jack prattles on about the lacrosse team try-out he attended last week at his college. Evie's just been accepted to the same one.

"They usually don't let sophomores on the team," Jack says, shouting over the non-existent wind, "but the coach saw my hamstrings and practically dragged me to the field!"

I don't hide my eye roll. The rowboats are only meant for two people but Evie, Jack, and I got an exception for ours, and it's a good thing; I suck at rowing and my sister isn't even trying. Her oar rests on her knees as her eyes scan the trees on the shoreline.

Occasionally, she'll flinch when their leaves drape into the boat, like they might electrocute her, but she is otherwise still. The first of the three bridges we'll pass beneath comes into view and I look back at the sixteen other rowboats making their way behind us, following on our waves.

We're meant to be at the head of the procession but occasionally, another boat will diverge from their place, inching closer toward us like zealots hungry for communion. A pair of our neighbors get too close and Jack pushes them away with his oar before they can ram into us. He continues monologuing about the correct way to bull dodge as I throw my hand over the edge of the boat and let it trail through the water. When a minnow swims up to us and bites my finger, I'm too surprised to shake it away. It's gone after a moment and I look down at the small trickle of blood floating in a perfect circle atop the water, a reminder of the river's appetite.

Jack's oar slams down and the ripple carries away the blood.

"Do you remember a few years ago when you taught me to fish here?" I ask, nudging Evie's arm.

My sister looks at me like my breathing annoys her and my voice is offensive. "Yes."

I look back down the water. The same minnow, I'm sure, is staying close to our boat. Maybe waiting for another bite.

"Why?" Evie prods.

"Because I hated it. I just thought you should know."

For a split second, I catch a smile on her face. She sits back and rolls her shoulders. “Everyone hates fishing here, Isaac,” she says, her fingers tapping rhythmically on her oar. “It’s not like you can eat most of what you catch, anyway.”

I glance down at the minnow greedily chasing after us and reckon she’s right. We went fishing every weekend that summer and the only thing we found were clams on the shoreline; a last second decision to avoid coming home empty-handed. As we come up to a small riptide, Jack pauses his soliloquy about the joys of the bull dodge to take hold of his oar with both hands and guide us around it. And suddenly it’s begun and the first bridge looms over us.

“This is so cool,” Jack says, turning around to face us. I notice his sunglasses have his college logo on them and, somehow, it makes me hate him more. “I mean, it’s like we’re leading a parade.” He gestures behind us at the boats but my gaze stays on the bridge.

There must be fifty people up there, standing shoulder to shoulder, all dressed like they’re all on their way to church, all staring at us in a frenetic silence. Mom insisted that I put on a button-up but it’s so hot that Jack and I are both wearing shorts. Evie’s wearing the same dress she was baptized in last year; I remember it was a warm day, the church’s air conditioning was broken, and the woman’s body was so firmly stuck on the riverbed that our pastor had suggested we hold the baptism in running water. When Evie surfaced from the river, she told me she could see the woman through the murk, watching her.

At the time, I thought she was lying.

Above us, one woman carries a parasol. A few men have hats. The crowd is silent as we row beneath them and the chattering on the boats behind us stops, as well. For a moment, all I can hear are the gentle splashes of our oars in the water. Then, we come out the other

side of the bridge, the conversations resume, a woman above us begins crooning a hymn, and Evie lets out a sigh.

“If you wanna pitch in, dude, that would be great,” Jack says, looking back at me. He pats Evie’s knee and I wonder—if we were to push him out of the boat—how far my sister and I would make it on our own.

My sister looks down at her oar and it’s like she’s noticing it for the first time. She makes a slow effort to pick it up, then plops it back down on her knees. Under Jack’s stare, I shove my hands in my pockets, then spread my fingers at the unfamiliar space. Our keys and wallets and phones have been left at home; it’s part of the ritual, to arrive without anything holding us to this world. Just after we got on the boat, Evie noticed a hair tie on her wrist and sling shot it onto the towpath.

“So fricking cool,” Jack says to neither of us, his eyes scanning the flock of boats behind us. It’s not yet noon but already the heat is blistering.

“Why did you invite him?” I mutter. I’m suddenly aware of how thirsty I am, but I don’t dare to cup my hands in the water.

Evie shrugs. “I thought I was supposed to.”

Our parents didn’t want to be on a boat. Mom has a bad back and Dad’s got a tricky knee, but they left the house earlier than we did. When Evie and I got up, there was leftover breakfast on the stove, a load of laundry in the wash, and their car was gone. We had an hour to ourselves just to sit and eat and wait before Jack arrived. When we left the house, we went through the garage and passed by the boxes she’d packed for college. I wonder what would have happened if we’d just left in that hour. I wonder if she resents me for not suggesting it.

“Do you think...” I start, but it’s an insensitive question and it catches in my throat.

“Do you think that maybe she fished here, too?”

Evie turns away from me as Jack flashes her another smile and starts describing his fishing club, and I didn’t realize it was possible for someone so boring to have so many interesting things going on in their life. I think she’s listening to him and ignoring me but, after a moment, Evie nudges my arm back and says,

“I bet she did. She was probably on a boat like this, too, going past...”

The other one, I think, as my sister turns in her seat and looks back toward the bridge, her eyes wide and searching like she might have missed a life jacket or a rope ladder or someone shouting that there’s been a mistake and we aren’t supposed to be here at all.

As we reach the only bend in the river, I see movement on our right, another boat gesturing for our attention. I lean over the side to hear and they shout in a voice,

“The council says to hold back! They’re not ready yet!”

I can see they have a walkie talkie in their boat—I guess to communicate with the masters of ceremony—and I try not to speculate too much about why we weren’t given one. Jack takes us into a zig-zag pattern, slowing our journey but not stopping us all together. The boats behind us follow suit. I don’t know what not ready yet means and beside me, Evie appears to be thinking the same thing.

“What do you think they’re doing?” she says, almost breathless.

“Hanging a balloon arch,” I reply.

My sister doesn’t smile. As we curve beneath another willow tree, she resumes her diligent task of removing the leaves from the boat, her fingers flinching at each one like the

willow trees are trying to shock her. When Evie first told me about the voices, we were getting off the bus and she'd turned and said it matter-of-factly, enunciating each syllable like she was saying each of the words for the first time.

"Most days, I hear voices in our walls. Isn't that strange?"

"Um." I looked at her, wondering if she was trying to develop a sense of humor. "Maybe there's a prescription for that?"

We hadn't talked about it again. The winter had turned to spring, we'd finished our classes and coasted into the beginning of summer, and Evie had stayed mostly normal. Except for when she was alone. When the space was quiet and her eyes would inevitably drift to the light blue walls of our house, her ears pricking like a basset hound, and she'd be stuck listening until whoever or whatever had started the conversation let her go.

There's a splash and I turn to see some younger kids leaning over the side of a boat four or five behind us. Their hands are cupped and weaving through the stagnant water, pulling it to their faces and splashing it through their hair. I should tell them that this water is meant for the dead, that if they catch fish, they'll just taste copper, and if they swallow it from their hands, the water will make them more ill than they can imagine. Before I get to saying any of this, though, Evie whips around in her seat and bites out a sharp,

"Stop it!"

Their hands open and the water falls back into the river. I glance at their skin; it's unchanged. We're not close enough, yet.

Our parents woke us up after the emergency town council meeting. Dad's face was bright, the same expression he had when we opened Christmas presents as kids, filled with excitement but prepared to quell any tantrums we were about to throw.

Evie had told too many people about the voices in the walls. So, when the council announced that the barricade wouldn't hold for much longer, the answer seemed obvious. Evie heard the voices, so Evie could help. Dad was proud. I felt like I'd just taken a sip from the river. Mom didn't say much. She asked if the voices were still there, Evie nodded; she asked if Evie was scared, my sister shook her head no; she asked if the voices were nice, Evie paused and said,

"Not lately."

My parents shared a conspiratorial nod, then Dad went to the family calendar above the breakfast table, flipped ahead two months, and circled an ordinary-looking Wednesday.

"Should be a sunny day," he said.

Mom wrapped her arms around my sister but she didn't hug her. If anything, it was just gravity that kept her arms there.

I don't realize we've reached the second bridge until the shadow slides across Evie's face. Like the first, the bridge is filled with people standing in silence but this one has a few children on it, too, and it makes my stomach turn. The body in the river is between the third and fourth bridge and the water here has taken on a sickly green hue. The minnow no longer follows us. As we pass under the bridge, a little girl waves at our boat. Evie holds up a trembling hand in response.

“We could just go,” I say to Evie, as we clear the bridge. As soon as I say it, it’s like our boat develops its own orbit. The words circle around us, refusing to be unsaid.

“No,” Evie replies, quietly, plaintively, and the orbit collapses and the words fall into the water, sinking to the depths. She offers me a lackluster smile. “It’ll be fine, Issacs, it will.”

“But why you?” I continue. “If she’s really down there blocking something from coming out, why can’t they put rocks down or a plug or something?”

“They’ve tried. The rocks broke. The plug sank.” Evie offers me another smile, this one nearly reaching her eyes. “When we get there, the voices will tell me what to do. Maybe there’s a type of rock we haven’t tried or a prayer, or something. No one likes this,” she pauses, looking at Jack for a second and the smile turns genuine, “but it’ll be over soon and then we can just go home.”

She turns away from me but I can tell that she’s listening when I say, “What if they ask you to get in the river?”

Evie swallows hard, doesn’t answer.

For a split second, there is a current and it’s harder to hold the paddle in the water and I think maybe the river is turning us back, like it’s heard our argument and taken my side. I reach my hand back into the water to feel that the current is real and not my eyes playing a trick. Then, I see a green hue creeping up my skin and I jerk my hand back.

“Dude.” Jack has set his paddle down and rotated in his seat. He faces me, his sunglasses lowered and his eyes wide. “Is that because of that dead lady? The one polluting this place?”

“Dead lady?” I repeat. I try to catch Evie’s eye but she’s focused on the willow leaves again. Jack reaches for my wrist but I pull my arm back before he can touch me. “Yeah, I mean the whole river’s kind of messed up,” I say.

“And today’s about fixing it,” Jack continues, like a child who’s learned something new, and now I really wonder what Evie told him. A part of me hoped that he’d come here completely oblivious.

“The woman isn’t polluting this place.” I don’t know why I’m correcting him. I look around, almost afraid that other boats might hear us and excommunicate me for giving away our secrets. But if Jack is on a boat, it feels like he deserves to know. “She was...put there to sort of help contain it. She’s kind of like a dam, keeping it in check.”

“Oh.” I can see Jack’s brain consider working out what I’ve just said, as it relates to the three of us in a boat and the procession behind us and the bridges we’ve passed under and the audience watching our movements. Then, I see his brain decide it would be too much work to put it all together, as he nods cheerfully and says,

“Small towns, am I right?”

He swivels back around and I trace the green handprint on my wrist. In school, we learned that the pollution was always in the river, dormant just beneath the bed, but a century ago, it started to wake. That’s the word they used – wake. Children became ill. Crops began to rot from the inside out. A woman in our town started hearing voices, and became convinced that the only way to keep the pollution at bay was to physically block it. When she died a decade later, her will stipulated that her body was to be dropped into the river on the exact spot where the first rocks had cracked.

The pollution had stopped, the evil kept at bay for another ninety years, and it's only when I hear my sister say my name in a small voice that I realize we're here. We've reached the body.

I don't know why I look. I expect to see nothing but murky water with a green tinge to it, a body deep and invisible to our eyes. But instead, the surface is clear. I see every strand of algae floating motionless and a pile of fish bones adorning the river floor. I see the absence of life and at the center of it, I see an old woman.

Her face is untouched by decomposition. Her clothes are intact and unaltered by decades under water. She doesn't look dead, just asleep, and her short grey hair stays still, like she's trapped in glass. The only reminder of our circumstances are her hands—green—and the way her torso has contorted. She lays at an angle, partly absorbed in the rocks beneath her, as something pulls tightly at her waist.

"Hey," Jack says, brightly, "it's the next bridge!"

Like the others, it's crowded and quiet, but on this bridge, everyone is dressed the same. Pastel dresses and trousers and blazers; brooches made from aluminum and dried seaweed... Jack squints at the bright colors as they reflect off the water. I look from person to person, and my stomach turns.

"Mom and dad. They're not here." My eyes continue tracing the bridge. Our parents left before we did. "Why aren't they here?"

Beside me, Evie is still.

"Oh, bummer. I'm sorry, man. Look, I'm sure they'll be at the next one," Jack says. "I mean, is this like an annual event?"

He seems genuinely concerned but it's evident that he has no clue why I'm upset. It makes me want to shove him off the boat even more.

My skin stings and I look down at my hand. The green is still there, though part of it has fallen away so my whole wrist isn't colored anymore. Instead, it looks as though five fingers have crawled up my arm, taken hold, then fallen away.

As we pass under the bridge, the only sound is footsteps as every person above us moves from one side to the other. I can feel the crowd's eyes on us as we approach the shoreline. The town councilors have arranged themselves in a V-formation and the councilwoman at the front waves a hand to greet us, her face expressionless.

She wades into the water, her suit immediately staining and this time, it's even more obvious that there are, indeed, handprints creeping up her body. Her steps become more arduous and she has to fight to stay upright, as the hands try to pull her down the farther she goes.

She takes hold of the rope at the front of our boat, guiding us closer to the shore. On either side of us, people line the river and toss ropes into the boats that follow, slowly pulling them to the sides so there's now a straight path behind us.

"Okay..." Jack mutters, as the councilwoman pulls with a bit too much force and our boat rocks. He scoots back so the three of us are shoulder to shoulder, and I can see his discomfort turn to fear.

I grab Evie's hand, tightly.

"Please don't get out of the boat," I beg, as we are dragged to the shore, more councilors taking hold of the rope and pulling.

The boat hits the mud with a loud thump, sending droplets of sour-smelling water onto our feet, and the councilwoman places a small bag beside Evie. The handprints have crawled up to her blazer, staining her.

I look along the line of council members for my parents but they're not here. In the distance, I can see the boathouse and, on the balcony, a group of people drinking wine and dancing. I wonder if my parents might be there, instead; not here to witness the ritual but to be celebrated for their part in it. My grip tightens on my sister's hand as the councilwoman does a full turn, then addresses the crowd,

"For the ritual of the river, we thank those who row," she bellows. Behind her, the council echoes her words.

"For the barricade offered, we thank the strength of the bridges."

Again, the council echoes. I can see Jack trying to mouth along but his confusion is evident. The councilwoman gestures for Evie to come forward and my sister stands, but she doesn't leave the boat, and all I want to do is go back to that day when Evie told me she heard the voices and make her swear she will never tell anyone else. She takes a step forward to the bow of the boat, directly in front of Jack. Her dress ripples as she rocks on her feet and her hand, still clasped in mine, trembles.

"For the woman in woe, we give thanks for the sacrifice by the woman in white."

At this, Jack looks at Evie and her white dress and he opens his mouth to say something, perhaps having figured out what I've known this whole time, that my sister is a sacrifice and we'll walk back into the house, passing her boxes for college without her, but before he can utter a word, as the council continues to echo the mantra, Evie reaches into the

bag at the front of the boat, pulls a gun from it and, with an eerily steady hand, shoots Jack in the face.

Nothing is slow.

Jack's head hits the floor of the rowboat.

My vision is wet.

Someone is screaming.

I fall out of my seat and crawl toward his body as Evie tugs her hand out of my grasp.

The gunshot rings in my ears. I think I'm the one screaming. The boat is moving again.

"Jack!" I shout. There is still a handprint on my wrist. "Jack!"

His face is wrong. Pieces are missing.

I whirl around, toward my sister. "Evie, help me!"

The boat lurches as Evie steps out. She wades through the water with gun in hand, toward the councilors on the shore. Then, the ropes holding the boat are released and we're going back down the river. It's never occurred to me before how they got the woman into that exact spot but now, I see the audience on the last bridge arming themselves with rocks. A second gunshot goes off and I don't know who's fired it or who it's aimed at. I'm distracted, avoiding the rock that plummets down.

It lands right beside Jack's face and the only thing worse than the way the boat moves under its weight is the sound it makes, wood splitting beneath the impact. The rock is so close to Jack's head, it must be deafening, he must have a headache, and another rock hits, but this

time it lands on his chest and there's a crack and I scream for the rocks to stop but I don't think anyone hears me. It becomes an onslaught and I push the rock off of Jack's chest and shake him—I'm shouting but I don't know what I'm saying—and I can feel the water soaking my feet and the sting of the green hue crawling up my ankles as the boat sinks, then hands are grabbing at me and I hear someone yelling,

“Get out of the boat, Isaac, come on!” and it's one of our classmates, the one with a walkie-talkie in his boat.

He's in the water, green handprints up to his neck, pulling me out. He half-carries me through the river back onto the shoreline and Jack and the rowboat sink so quickly, right above the woman's body, that there's no point in us going back. We break through the line of people on the shore who seem oblivious to us being there and as I come out of the water; I realize the color staining my skin is fading.

My classmate lets me go and I collapse on the shore. The crowd begins to clap but I can't distinguish the sounds of applause from rocks and I hold my head down against the mud, trying to protect myself. I'm vaguely aware of footsteps around me as the crowd starts parading across the shore and I look up in time to see Evie at the front of the procession. I strain my neck, holding my head up and croaking out her name, my throat on fire. But she doesn't look back for me, or toward the river, and as the group moves toward the boathouse, I catch a glimpse of my parents' car parked outside.

I don't know what the voices told my sister... or if they spoke to her at all. I do know that the water is green and the fish taste of death and now, there are two bodies at the bottom of the river. I know that school children will have another name to learn now but, in time, Jack will lose his, just like the woman did. I get to my feet and start toward the boathouse,

wanting to find my sister and to go home and for everything to be okay again, but then it hits me that 'okay' does not exist anymore. Evie is the same as everyone else here. And I will never be able to go 'home' again.

I turn and walk back along the river: not stopping until I am past Jack's body, his blood stuck in a cloud beneath the water, not until my sandals dry and the wind stops blowing willow leaves across my path and onto the surface; not until the water beside me is finally still, and I reach the signs telling me that this part of the river is safe.