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The Bridge

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The Bridge

Tijera Johnson

We all knew it was coming. The news broke twenty-four hours prior. The only thing left to ponder was how we were going to end it. Time. Most chose to spend it with family or have marathon sex. As a single, twenty-four-year-old woman who aged out of the foster care system, neither was an option for me. But I need to do SOMETHING on the eve of the end. There was one place... When life gives you lemons, I guess. It's four in the morning and the last sunrise is ascending.

I found this gem while looking for pots of gold. I never did find the end of a rainbow, but the adventures always produced treasures like this place. It's an iron bridge that hasn't been used for decades. Surrounding the giant relic are unfinished buildings and eroded rocks that once belonged to a river. It's quiet here in this forgotten corner of the city. Which is why I'm surprised when I see her.

It's not like I thought I was the only one who knew about this place, I've just never seen anyone else. She's tiny. Petite. Her hair is the biggest thing on her. Full, bouncy curls of dark auburn dance in the breeze. Her windbreaker devours her frame and does little to chase the morning cold. She sits on the rail, legs swinging between two rods as she gazes over the horizon. It's only as the bridge protests my weight as I sit that she notices me. When she does, her eyes widen in surprise.

She's older than I thought. Maybe my age, plus or minus two years. She stares for a while, looking me over. Not one to waste an opportunity, I catalog all the features you can only observe close up. Her eyes are intense. Not their color—warm honey—but the look in them that suggests her mind is working a mile a minute. Her skin is a few shades lighter than mine. I notice the pink earbuds in her ears a second before she pulls the right one out. She offers it to me after one more quick look. Her slight accent is a surprise.

The next song comes on as the sun starts to peek through the clouds. It's about the desert and the danger of getting lost. The fear of being buried alive. It was the soundtrack to a popular movie back in the day. I think. In the silence before the next song, she tells me her name is

Priyanka. And that's how we spend the next six hours. One at a time, we share pieces of ourselves between lyrics. I learn her parents are in India—there was no time for her to get there. She's an only child. She started making this playlist the moment the news broke. She found the bridge three years ago, when she first moved here, after getting lost on her way to a pizza parlor. I tell her about having no one. About my first kiss with Alina when I was fourteen. I tell her about my tattoos. We share our passions, fears, hopes and dreams. We share things we've never told anyone else.

Eventually, the need to eat arises. After the first song, there is an unspoken agreement we will spend this day together. So I swing my legs back toward the ground and stand before helping her do the same. We are still connected by a pink wire, so we stand as close as we can without touching. The music is still playing, so we are silent. I lead her out of Tea Leaf Street onto Blueville Avenue. Yesterday, the street was teeming with traffic. Today, it's as vacant as the voices on an instrumental track. After foolishly realizing no shops or restaurants will be open, I start walking toward my apartment. Two blocks before we reach our destination, a man wearing a beard, little ducky socks and nothing else runs past us never uttering a word. We clasp hands and run the rest of the way laughing uncontrollably.

I live on the third floor in apartment #315. Usually, it takes forever for the elevator to get to the lobby, but not today. It really is the little things that make us happy. As we try to catch our breath, I notice our adrenaline is as high as the bearded man. Priyanka's pupils are blown wide and her smile is radiant. She's breathtaking. Something is amiss though. As she looks around my apartment, I finally realize what it is. My pink earbud fell out during our run. We are still holding hands.

When she notices, she slowly slips her fingers from mine. Embarrassed, I scavenge the kitchen for food. My grocery day was scheduled for tomorrow and there was no hope of getting inside the stores once the news broke. Priyanka's gaze lingers on my wall of photography and tower of books. My place isn't anything to brag about. Just four walls, a kitchen, and the door by the window that leads to my mini-bedroom and "en suite bathroom." But, it's home and mine. Sadly, the best I can come up with for lunch is fancy turkey sandwiches and mint Oreos for dessert. As I start to gather ingredients—lettuce, tomatoes, jalapeños, relish, cheese, avocados, spinach, bread—she comes into the kitchen and starts gathering items from the pantry. I forgot I had some of them. She wraps her pink earbuds around her

phone, places it on the counter, rolls up her sleeves, and gets to work. We work seamlessly together and talk freely as more music plays. We laugh and sing. Once the meal is prepared, we sit on my tiny couch and take in the feast before us: fancy sandwiches, pita bread chips, mint Oreos, white wine, chai tea and water.

It's two o'clock when we finish eating. "Sunset" is scheduled for eight p.m. I ask her if she wants to call her parents. The phone towers are overwhelmed. No calls are getting through any time soon. Thankfully, she said what she needed to say the last time they spoke.

Six hours. What shall we do? We open the bottle of red wine and play Truth or Dare. It's fun.

Five hours. We play Scrabble. I lose.

Four hours. We paint. Mine is better.

Three hours. We put the earbuds back in and dance because talking is getting too hard. Making things too real.

Two hours. Still connected, we make some more chai tea that neither of us drinks. We walk onto my balcony and stare. We only talk between songs.

One hour. We walk into my bedroom and close all the windows and blinds. The only light comes from the cellphone as it projects stars onto my ceiling. Hands clasp. Legs intertwine. Silence is our friend. We lock eyes and brace for impact. Her eyes are my anchor. I never look away.

Tonight, the sun won't set.

It will fall.

We will fall.

Together.

Into the great aby—