

The Bridge

A short story by Howie Wu

The whirr of car engines beckoned the morning rush hour. I could just make out the people in each vehicle, mostly middle-aged men and women, all headed towards the concrete and steel mecca of the city. I doubt many of them would have noticed me walking on the sidewalk, heading in the same direction. Collectively we were a current, driven forward by a life of work.

The bridge loomed ahead, with its thousands of tonnes of steel and reinforced concrete somehow floating in mid-air. This one in particular stood for over one hundred years, providing a path over the river fifty metres below for generations of people. The gate into the city, as formidable today as it had been a century ago.

It seems long ago now, but on the longest days of summer, my ten-year-old self would roam the sidewalks of this bridge with my brother and our friends, gazing in amazement at how far a drop it was to the river below. We would often drop stones picked from the river bank, returning them in the most dramatic of ways to their homes below. Sometimes with the larger ones we would be able to make out the sound of stone hitting water, a thud by the time it reached us above.

But times had changed since then. It would be near impossible to hear stones hitting water over the sound of traffic that now crossed the bridge. And a sign banning stones or other objects from being thrown from the bridge, lest some unfortunate kayaker or swimmer be hit, had irrefutably marked the end of our childhood days.

The bridge often reminded me of my brother, a happy-go-lucky child by heart, who was drained of his happiness over time by the weight of the world. The days we spent on this bridge were distant memories: a bygone innocence, a freedom lost. I loved him throughout his life, but I couldn't help but wonder if love was a different thing back in the days when we played on this bridge. Maybe then it was not something we locked up in our hearts and only doled out to those who seemed deserving of it.

If only I had kept that childhood love in me, then maybe I would've felt the hurt and pain my brother had felt these last few years. Maybe I would've seen past the drug use and found his tortured soul, in need of caring and warmth. Maybe then I could've prevented him from dying by overdose a week ago when he crossed to the other side of an abyss, leaving this tragic world behind.

Now memories were all that were left, and with each day, they got more and more blurry, as if they became more refracted while slipping into the depths of an unending deep, soon becoming lost forever. What was left behind was the pain, the anger, the guilt - the signs of withdrawal felt by those of us who had once taken pleasure in the sharing of his life.

I made my way halfway across the bridge and paused for a moment to observe the rising sun from the east - its orange glow casted bright lines of fire on the cool water below. The river itself moved east, originating from tiny mountain streams in the west and growing in its course to raging rapids that eventually joined with the sea thousands of miles away.

Once I arrived at the other side, the blue of the river had been replaced by the blue reflective glass of city buildings: the statues of modern idolatry. I turned west towards the law firm, eventually finding my building. A humble brownstone, built in the early 20th century as a bank, now repurposed for 21st century use. Inside, the ceiling tiles had all been removed, exposing wood beams and networks of air

ducts. This had been intended to give the interior a retro warehouse look, a design once confined to the dustbins of history but since reborn, as if the past were now the future.

Finally arriving at my office, I put my belongings aside and took a breath before starting the day. It was only the second day I had been back since taking time to attend my brother's funeral. Many of my colleagues were aware, and despite their messages of condolence through email or text, I had only spoken to a few in-person about his death. As much as I appreciated their concern and support, I also just wanted to get back to work, burying my emotions with the weight of responsibility.

I had been working on a case the last few weeks, one of the few murder trials I took on each year. As a defence lawyer, I had to prepare myself for backlash and criticism in even the most minor of cases, but a murder trial was something else. Defending the indefensible, as some would accuse. Nonetheless, I believed it was important to bring out the stories that were left hidden. These included the poverty that left one with not much choice other than to steal, the abuse suffered in childhood at the hands of those who were supposed to love, and the suffering that came with ostracization and discrimination. It was I who had to remind the court that individuals could not be fully understood through collective narratives of good versus bad.

This morning, I sifted through more documents my client had provided to help me construct my arguments. It was irrefutable he had murdered the victim. There was clear cut evidence for that. My role now was to make him seem as "human" as possible, not the monster that he would otherwise appear. Hopefully through this the judge would consider reducing his sentence and maybe offer the possibility of parole down the road.

As I looked through the stack of papers, a handwritten note caught my eye. Looking closer, I saw it was a poem, written by my client for his sister, who had been tragically raped and murdered years ago. We had talked recently about how this had devastated him, having been raised by his sister in the presence of inconsistent parents who had both struggled with drug use.

*You were the sunshine that brightened my days,
You were the wind that propelled me forward,
You were the ripple that started the wave,
Your life was cut short,
But your love is unending.*

Suddenly, a burning heat enveloped my stomach, rising up in my body. I felt like a constrictive layer of clothing had been wrapped around my chest, tightening with each breath. Little pinpricks poked my skin, emptying the sweat glands, and my face became numb. Air became a suffocating mass, trapping me into an enclosed space of existence. Thoughts of past or future were no longer relevant. The world collapsed into this very moment, and all I could feel was emptiness.

"Are you okay?"

One of my colleagues happened to be passing by, and seeing that I looked unwell, popped her head through the doorway

Of course, that question implied concern yet I could not ignore a certain judgement being wrought upon me. As if being not "okay" produced too much discomfort to tolerate, requiring immediate

correction. As if I could now be expected to comprehend and express using words for all the reasons why I was not “okay”. As if words could heal all wounds. Indeed, if only someone like my brother had been “okay”, then he might have survived. If only he had been “okay”, then maybe he would have been someone loved and cared for, someone as real as the *sunshine*, the *wind*, and the *wave*. Not someone ignored and pitied into nothingness.

“You know what, I’m not okay. I need to go home.”

I grabbed my belongings and left the office, stepping back into the concrete jungle. I managed my way through the maze of streets, finding myself once again in front of the bridge. The traffic had gotten heavier, with more pedestrians and cyclists moving to and fro on the sidewalk. I got half-way across, and needing to catch my breath, stopped to peer over the edge and examined the river’s expanse. The drop down to the river below seemed as high as ever, and surely anyone that fell today would never return, but instead drift off thousands of miles to the sea.

The chime of a bike bell interrupted my thoughts, and while moving to the side I noticed on the ground a few feet to my right a round stone. It was unusual to find stones of this size on the bridge deck as they would mostly be found in the riverbank below. Maybe it was some massive bird that brought it up or some child who had been hoping to throw it, only to be disappointed by the sign forbidding such an action.

I instinctively grabbed it, cradling it in my hand. It felt strangely reassuring to hold, its weight a physical reminder that I was still here, still in my body. The stone appeared smooth all over, but if I brushed carefully I could feel the coarse grains of its structure. Millions of years of erosion by water and air had not completely worn over its roughness. Born out of a fury of heat and compression, it existed as an artifact of a past that was no longer. And given enough time, it would dissolve grain by grain, mineral by mineral, back into the essence of Earth.

A thought came to mind. Looking back over the railing and glancing left and right to make sure no one would notice, I held the stone over the edge. Then I thought of my brother.

This is for you.

I let go, watching the stone grow smaller and smaller until it hit the surface of the water. Its impact made only a small splash in the rapids below. It was impossible to hear against the traffic, but I imagined that someone, perhaps some kayaker who happened to be passing by, or some animal, like the ducks who made their homes below the bridge, or at least some object, like the countless other stones sunk in the river, would have heard the splash, would have felt its ripple, and would have known it had been there.