

Beneath the Bridge

They were constructing a new bridge over the river that's supposed to replace the current bridge before it snaps. They got all the framework and bases in, creating a little bank under the bridge already. Great place for teenagers to get away, drink and smoke. During the week, the homeless claim it late night through early morning. We hadn't been to the bridge in a while, since the police got a tip about marijuana. I'm sure it was Jared. The idiot. He wasn't wrong, but he could've at least asked to come.

So we—my buddy Marcus, his girl Sara, her twin Margret, my brother, and me—all go to explore the actual bridge, not the bank below. They just have the framing in. Some concrete and a few metal poles. Lots of discouraging signs like “Do not cross” and “Dead End” and barrels with the blinking lights. Always wondered who Bob was; how he keeps his name on all of them.

As we're goofing off, my brother dares me to walk on one of the beams of the unfinished bridge. I'm not good with heights. But Sam just keeps egging me on, starts saying I'm a wimp, and offering to do my chores for a week. Then Marcus gets in on it, bringing Sara with him, until all of them are now whisper-chanting at me. How can I refuse?

I look for the widest red, poop-speckled beam. They are right behind me. I settle on the center beam. It's spaced farther from its neighbors than some of the other beams. Who knows why? Here I go.

I place one foot on the beam, then two, creeping along the beam. It's a little slick here and there. Probably some of the bird poop hasn't dried. I can see some of the water below now. Time to turn back. As I turn, my left foot shoots off the beam, courtesy of fresh feces no doubt. Offsetting my balance, I fall to one side. My hands reach out and just barely catch the next beam over.

“Chris!”

“Yo!”

“AHHH!”

“Oh my God!”

I’m dizzy. My brother is coming to get me. I was never on the weight lifting team. The water is coming to get me. The beam of the bridge darkens and fades against the night sky like a dream. My breath left me for the deafening rush of wind resisting my intrusion on its nightly prow.

I land on something. Or in something. Not the water. I think there was a crack, like a tree branch snapping off. I see water coming for me again, but it’s above me, enclosing over me from all sides. The water smacks down on me, ice cold. I don’t want to drown.

My head hurts. I’m cold. My head hurts. I’m wet. I’m in water. My head. Something is underneath me. My head—something is moving! I bolt up. I’m in a boat. Between my feet, a head. A bloody head! I scream so loud I hurt my own ears. Thick, glistening, pale worm-like creatures were relocating from the unknown face to my legs. I can’t tumble out of the little boat fast enough.

A new kind of splash as I enter the river, but I hear more splashing. I’m grabbed from behind. I can’t fight my way free. I’m released, land on the sand of the river bank, still below the unfinished bridge. My brother looks down at me. Marcus appears above me too.

“Dude, are you alright? That was one heck of a fall!”

“We called the police; they’re sending an ambulance!”

Sara and Marcus complement each other perfectly. Or was that Margret? Oh well, they're both here. Sam hugs me, proceeds to yell at me, then at himself. I'm still staring at the rugged little boat with the man. Margret (or Sara) heads for the boat.

"Don't!" I even surprised myself. "M-maggots!" I'm shivering. Sirens on the horizon.

They tell me he's alive. The doctors. Apparently, maggots can clean a wound by eating infected flesh. Yuck. Gross. He was there at least thirty-six hours, judging from some of the maggot's stages of growth. I can't imagine. Paralyzed from a bullet hitting the spine, bleeding, knowing what was happening, watching and feeling bugs lay eggs and crawl in the wound.

I'm shivering. Sam is with me. The others are waiting. There's Mom.

by Bet Tauscher