

BRIDGES

Jimmy told me to do Kegel exercises.

He said, "Marie, I don't feel nothing when I fuck you. My dick's banging around in there like a baton."

I told him to go straight to hell but I know he's right. My vagina is probably as stretched out as old underwear. No sense denying it. You have three kids and that's what you get.

It doesn't matter. Me and Jimmy are doing a bridge tonight. I hope it's the Brooklyn Bridge. My favorite, old and pretty. Jimmy doesn't say so but I know it's his favorite, too. I don't know why men are so stupid when it comes to stuff like that, they just can't say what's on their mind.

My feet are killing me. They always do at this job I have standing here all day at a checkout counter ringing up another people's food.

"Shoot. Sorry. I didn't mean to let it drip on your pocketbook like that."

They don't wrap the meat tight enough in the Meat Department, what is the matter with them? The blood's always running all over my counter, the food. Disgusting, stinking mess. And this bitch here won't give me an inch

even though I'm apologizing. I'll do a Kegel in her honor. In and out. In and out.

"You have a nice day."

Bitch. Toehead, prissy bitch. It doesn't matter. She doesn't matter. Tonight me and Jimmy are going out. The kids will be with his mother. We'll get in our car, drive down Fourth Avenue to Atlantic Avenue to Boerum Place, then zoom right onto the Brooklyn Bridge. I'll beg Jimmy to put the top down and he'll do it because he wants to anyway, he just can't say so. He'll put the radio on and I'll sing to it so loud he'll get embarrassed. I'll put my arms up in the air and let the breeze whip around my pits and my neck and hair.

Six o'clock. Dam, hurry up, hurry up.

I do a jig at my register for Mr. Bascali and beg him to let me go early but he just hushes me. He's a nice man, but he won't bend the rules even if he likes you.

I've got five people on my line throwing killer looks. Let me think about Jimmy to pass the time. He's already home, taking off his muddy boots. Next he'll drop his jeans stiff with plaster and dirt and leave them in the corner so he can step right back in them the next morning, gritting his teeth

because he knows they're so filthy. His socks he peels like grapes, he can't stand touching his own socks. He rips off his shirt he's so anxious to get in the hot water and get clean.

"Mr. Bascali, God please let me go."

Mr. Bascali won't budge, he laughs at me, his white teeth shining in his brown face. He thinks I'm a prankster.

Jimmy's in the shower by now, scrubbing every inch so hard his skin gets raw. He can never get that plaster dust out of his skin. It's as if it hangs in the air waiting for him to get out, then drops right back on him. His skin always has this white dust on it. I can't even lick it off.

Take the time card, punch it, *ding, ding*. My eight hours are over, thank you very much. I swing my food bag. Inside's a roasted chicken from Deli. Jimmy's going to say we can't afford takeout, but he'll eat it alright. My feet crunch on crack vials and slide on grease slicks in the parking lot. A couple of stray dogs walk by, sad things. Even in sunshine, Pathmark by the Brooklyn Battery Tunnel is such an ugly place it gets me down. The expressway rattles overhead, junkyards and recycling places all over. It makes the food you buy here less appetizing somehow. The yuppies still come

here though, from Park Slope, Carroll Gardens, the Heights, all with a blue and orange Pathmark circular in their hands, looking for a bargain.

I walk to the F train on Court Street and climb the three flights to the platform then lean against the wall because my feet are screaming. On Saturday you can wait forever for the local. And it's sure to be crowded with everyone coming back from the city. I look past the pillars holding up the station and spot the Statue of Liberty in the harbor. The city is as clear as anything up here. I don't get to the city much. Maybe tonight, if Jimmy goes over the Brooklyn, we can zip down to Battery Park and take a ride on the ferry. Or go for a walk in Little Italy. He likes those dried chick peas they sell on the street.

Jimmy's on the bed by now, looking at the News or taking a nap, snoring a little, soft, like a kid snoring. Is it weird to love your husband the way I do? To still want him? Maybe I got it from my parents. Me and my brothers weren't supposed to notice how mom and dad were always at each other. My dad's hands couldn't stop reaching for her waist, her thigh. Mom swatted him away but she liked it. That's how it is with me. I love Jimmy's fingers on me, in me. Rough like sandpaper, bumpy with all those calluses.

I get on the F train and curse because I forgot to take off my blue Pathmark smock. Everyone looks at me like I grew another head.

"Damm, Marie, get those ugly shitstompers off."

Jimmy hates when I wear construction boots. He says they're like his. And what are you? A guy? Am I married to a guy?

I don't say squat to him. Some things aren't worth fighting over. You pick your fights.

"I'm taking one of your beers, Jimmy."

He rolls his eyes and *tsks*. He hates me drinking beer. Out of a bottle really ticks off him too, which is exactly what I do. His mother would never do it. The Queen of the teetolating Pollacks.

She *tsks* me too. She's here, she's always here. Every morning she waddles from her house across the street and plops at our kitchen table and sucks tea through a sugar cube. I feel her Siberian husky eyes staring at my rear as I bend into the refrigerator.

"I don't know how you work in that place. That Pathmark."

I don't say anything. Don't have to because she'll keep on blabbing, she won't even wait for an answer to be out of my mouth before she's insulting me again.

"Those girls at the register. Some of them have gold teeth for God's sake."

I grab my bag off the hall table and open it in front of her.

"I got a roasted chicken."

"I won't eat no chicken from Pathmark. Place is filthy."

Who's asking you to eat it bitch. I put it in the refrigerator and tell Jimmy I'm taking a shower. I can hear his mother yakking till the water comes on drowning her out. You pick your fights.

Jimmy, make love to me. Please.

I'll ask him that tonight. He likes to be asked. It turns him on. He doesn't say it does, but I know. The kids will be with his mother. We'll go for a ride, fast, top down. Over the Brooklyn Bridge. We'll get a buzz on. This morning I poured the vodka into the empty spring water bottles from work and put them in the freezer. Leave them out for a while and they'll be perfect, the vodka cold enough to sip straight. It's not smart drinking the way we do when we drive. Jimmy claims he drives better a little high. He keeps his mints close in case we get pulled over.

"Marie, you get paid?"

I peek out from the shower curtain and see Jimmy sitting on the bowl.
Yes hon, I tell him, all cashed, in my pocketbook.

His head's down staring at the tile. He won't look at me naked. I want him to look at me. I'm not so bad.

"Does your mother know we're going out?"

Yeah, he says and he gets up and out. I hear him empty my change purse, the coins clanging as he drops them into the jar, our vacation fund jar. We saved nearly four hundred dollars that way last year. Never use your change, Jimmy always tells me, break a dollar first.

"Three kids are a lot for her you know," he says from the bedroom.

I feel myself getting pissed, the way he always sees that old rhino as fragile, but I don't want to argue, not tonight. I tell him that the kids love being with his mother, and I'm not lying. They're part of Jimmy so she treats them like gold, whips up noodle pudding and cakes for them. Takes them for fries and hot dogs at Nathan's in Coney Island.

"She's old now you know. She's sick."

Jimmy, Jimmy. One thing I can't stand about you is the way you cling to that old bat. Sometimes I can't wait for her to die so you can let go.

Which bridge, Jimmy. Which bridge?

I was sixteen, you were nineteen. The dance at Saint Savior's. Jimmy drove me home, then said he didn't want to say goodnight yet. He had his dad's car, big old Lincoln convertible and we drove, fast as shit, right over the Brooklyn Bridge and he blasted the radio and the air blew all around me, on me. Manhattan was there, close but far. I never felt so good. I felt like I was in some movie. We went to Chinatown, got Hong Kong donuts from an old lady making them in a shack on Elizabeth Street. They melted in my mouth.

I put on my special underwear I bought out of a catalog for tonight. Jimmy doesn't say anything, but I know he sees it. Black. Lacy. I tell him to get the bottles out of the freezer and he sneaks them back in his shirt and sticks them in my bag. He doesn't want his mother to see. Jimmy's father died from drinking though his mother would never admit it. His father loved his vodka, pepper vodka. *Wodka* he always called it, with his funny moustache making him look like he should be playing a music box with a monkey on his shoulder. I liked Jimmy's dad, the way he made everyone laugh, even Jimmy's mother. Too bad he died. Maybe Jimmy's mother be nicer to me, if he was still around to make her laugh.

I got drunk on vodka the first night we made love. Our second date. We went to the roller skating rink by Park Circle. Jimmy kept telling me to take sips out of the jelly jar he filled with his father's stuff. After a couple of hits I could drink it down without gagging. He gave me a menthol cough drop in case the guy working the floor got a whiff of my breath. I nearly killed myself on my skates so we left and whizzed to Prospect Park and parked near the boat house on a road that winds down to the lake. No one was there, no one was supposed to be there, the park was closed. Jimmy kept telling me he loved me. We did it in the front seat of the big Lincoln, the door handle butting in my back.

The sky's full of rain. Jimmy won't risk putting the top down. And he's heading for the Verrazano Bridge which is too far from the city to hop there for a bite after, so I know we'll get stuck in some pizzeria in Staten Island. Not that I mind the Verrazano, but on foggy nights like this, it's scary. Too big. Those pilings front and back look like they could be the gateway to heaven.

We get across okay though Jimmy's drinking more than usual. We eat pizza in a hole called Nat's. The only thing going for it is the free liter of

Coke you get with a pie. It's not bad pizza, just not as good as from our neighborhood. Jimmy's quiet, eats like he's in a hurry.

I feel disappointment climbing up my throat like heartburn.

"Jimmy, let's take a ride to Coney Island. I feel like a walk on the boardwalk. Clear my head."

He doesn't answer, just sort of grunts when he gets in the car. He's in a mood. I do need to clear my head, I wasn't kidding. I'm drinking more than usual, too. I can see that I already drank more than half my bottle, but I still take a swallow. Jimmy doesn't notice, puts the car in drive. He says he wants to go the park. He says he wants to talk.

"Talk? Okay, okay, sure why not."

We go back over the Verrazano, it looks even bigger, darker, and I open my window wide so the night air hits my face, my hair. It's filled with rain that won't come down.

We drive past the exit for 65th Street. Two blocks in and one avenue over is St. Bart's, the church where we got married. I try and see the top of it like I always do when I'm on the expressway. Superstition I guess. I never set foot in that church before that day and haven't since. My parents were pissed that we didn't have the ceremony in Saint Savior's, but Jimmy said we

had to do it to get by his mother. The old bat told him that if she was going to be a grandmother to the baby I was carrying, we would have the ceremony in her parish. At the church door she leaned over, whispered in my ear, what I see here? Two fools, only one in love. That's what she said, she was horrible even back then, hated me the minute she laid eyes on me. By then I was so crazy in love it seemed hardly a price to pay at all.

Jimmy drives way up on the grass to get past the barricades at the park entrance. He hasn't said a word to me but that's the way he gets sometimes when he drinks. He steers the car into the meadow near the woods. I take another swill of vodka. It's so quiet.

"We got to talk, Marie."

I hear him but my eyes are foggy like the night. I just want to fuck and go to sleep. They're playing Sting on the radio and I turn it up. Jimmy says no radio, but I don't pay him any mind. Sit still he says, but I don't, I dance in my seat, swish this way and that, try to lick his neck, unbutton his shirt. He keeps telling me we got to talk Marie, but I know he's teasing, I know what he wants. I climb on top and start to rub him down there, unbutton my shirt a little so he can see my black, lacy bra. I whisper, what's the matter Jimmy? but I don't wait, I put my mouth hard on his, suck tight

on his tongue and finally he can't stand it, he pushes me down on the seat, gets his legs in between mine. The vodka comes up in my throat, but I don't care, I kiss his head, his ears, pull at his collar so I can lick his neck.

"What the fuck?"

Jimmy's pounding. I pull the collar down hard thinking I'm wrong, drunk. But I see a hickey. I know my eyes work. I know what a hickey looks like.

"Get the fuck off me!"

He's going ninety miles an hour now. I couldn't stop him if I hit him on the head with a sledgehammer. I punch him in the neck, squeeze my legs together, scream get off and he hears me this time, he looks at me, his eyes go wide then close shut and he comes and yanks out of me like I'm on fire. He's saying Jesus, Marie, what the fuck? doing up his pants like I'm going to cut it off, like he's guilty as shit, me screaming where'd you get that hickey? I didn't give you that hickey, I didn't do it, who did? Huh? Who did? I grab the door handle and get out, I'm screaming I hate hickeys, hate them, and I'm crying too, holding my pants with one hand and raising the other one, staring at Jimmy sitting there staring at me through the windshield and I give him the finger then puke, all vodka and pizza in the mud.

I dream about Jimmy. I dream about how I used to dream about him. Sometimes I dream about that raspberry on his neck. Some dreams it gets bigger and bigger till it takes over his whole head. His new girlfriend looks like she gives hickeys. Like she likes giving them, like they're the biggest accomplishment in her life. I was surprised he went for the type. Young and stupid. Young, stupid and skinny.

I've been working a lot lately. Mr. Bascali got me promoted to Assistant Manager in the Meat Department. I know he must have heard about what happened. This is more money, more hours. It keeps me from driving past Jimmy's new apartment all the time, wanting to talk to him, or kill him. It keeps me busy. It keeps me from going nuts. I'm taking the new job seriously. Showing those fools how to wrap meat.

Jimmy's mother still hangs around. She still takes the kids. She comes over, has her tea, as if nothing happened.

Tonight after work I'll drive around for a while. I'll look up at the apartment house windows like I used to when I was a kid, make up stories about the people I see, wonder about them, if any of them are like me. I have room in my head for stuff like that now. Easing Jimmy out of there bit by bit. Later I'll wind up driving over the Brooklyn Bridge, still my favorite. I

don't go over the other bridges anymore, don't have to. Next to me on the seat is a pair of Jimmy's old construction boots I found in the back of the closet after he left. I kept them for a while, when I thought he might come back. Then when that wasn't going to happen, I thought I could call him to drop by and pick them up. Now I'd like to stop on the bridge if the cops would let me, and throw them over. No ceremony, no nothing, just watch them float down the East River.
