

I saw her first- meaning for the first time in my life and before she had yet seen me- on the best bridge in the world. It has always seemed to me to be an ancient, timeless bridge, something that has always been and will always be. Its weathered wooden frame had once been painted a now-indeterminable shade of deep red, evident only in a few stubborn strips of paint that fate has thus far chosen to spare from the elements and from peeling, absentminded fingernails. Wooden beams stretch upwards and outwards from the middle of each side of the walkway, splayed like a child's expectant fingers about to be gifted with some toy or piece of candy or any of the countless trinkets that defy their adult-ordained triviality to inspire the untainted joy of youth. The beams reach up to support wooden arches that run on either side of the bridge, so that the walkway appears to be guarded by the top halves of twin wagon wheels, reminiscent to me even then of the wheels that carried the pioneers, starving, ill, and desperate to discover their fortune, to the state that I called home over a century and a half into their future. Gazing up at the spokes, I would often consider the trials of those early gold-rushers, debating with myself whether or not I would have deemed the possibility of finding exquisite wealth worth the misery that the journey brought about for thousands of other dreamers. The wagon wheels are connected to each other by the tightly organized planks of the walkway and by additional beams, each spaced six feet apart, stretching from arch to arch overhead. These beams had always made me strangely sad, and I had pointed out to my father two years prior the injustice inherent in the planks of the walkway being so close and cozy, like a family, while their overseers were forced to exist in measured, suspended isolation, never allowed to be any closer to their parallel wooden kin than the nails driven through each end would permit. Until this year, I had maintained that I would rather see empty sky over the

bridge than continue to observe the solitary, sadly spaced beams. However, in the instant I saw her standing between the wagon wheel spokes, framed perfectly and eternally in that moment by the shadows falling from the same beams I had always pitied, I came to understand their place in my destiny and thanked them for their endless sacrifice. She stood ten feet away and leaned against the bridge's aged but sturdy railing, her silhouette boldly yet unknowingly etching itself forever in my mind, and stared down at the water of the same mountain stream I had visited every Memorial Day weekend for as long as I could remember. Her focus on the activities of the fishermen below gave me a chance to indulge the first urges I had ever felt in my life to simply be present in a single moment, basking in its simple extravagance, allowing myself to be washed away and drowned in the light of someone extraordinary, unburdened yet by the anxiety of feeling that at any moment my gaze would be returned and I would be forced to retreat. The oversized flannel she wore was comprised of white, green, and grey squares arranged in no discernable pattern, triggering the itch that reminded me of my ever-present need for order. However, miraculously, it was the first time in my dozen years of life that I could recall such disorganization seeming comparatively unimportant to me, my attention riveted instead on how small she seemed, engulfed in this mismatched fabric, and how desperately I wanted to protect her, fulfilling my role as a man as it had always been described to me. In a moment of epiphany, I realized that this desperation for fulfillment must have been the same primal desperation driving the oft-contemplated pioneers, and I knew immediately that I would cross the country barefoot and starving a thousand times for a chance to secure a fraction of the fortune that had been impossibly placed before me. Her lush caramel-colored hair cascaded down, attempting mercifully to cover the offensively designed flannel, successful in distracting

me with the way its sheen gently caught and reflected the sun until a point just above the small of her back, the flannel's excess fabric in turn throwing itself petulantly downwards and falling just above the backs of her bare knees. The delicate skin of her hands, legs, left cheek, and the small portion of her nose that was visible to me were a color I would later come to describe as olive but could at the time only think of as heavenly. I was vaguely aware of the man standing to her right, a man who I, with any thought or attention paid, would have recognized as her father, but to me that mature connection, the impending intimidation of the first handshake, the fear of never being good enough for another man's daughter was beyond imagination. The only connection that mattered was between me and possibility. I contained within me suddenly the burning, dizzying love that can only exist in the imagination of those not yet burdened with the understanding of the pain that love cannot help but bring. It was a guiltless feeling that summoned forth adult expressions such as "true love" and "soul mate," notions previously present only in the periphery of my understanding, and laid bare to me their meanings free from any implications of danger, free from the cutting, ironic edge such ideas gain as years of experience are added to the mind contemplating them. I realized suddenly that I had not yet seen her eyes, and the idea that such a creature could look upon me as easily as I looked upon her filled me with an inexplicable sense of dread and embarrassment. How dare I revel in such an impossibly important presence, being no more than I was? At any moment, this deity could turn, presenting me with an unobstructed view of what was surely the most perfect face that has ever been imagined, more perfect than the Mona Lisa, more perfect than the supermodels on the magazine covers at FoodMaxx, more perfect than my perfect mother's, and all she would be met with was two wildly unworthy eyes peering irreverently from a three-days

unwashed face, the dirt that I had before worn as a badge of manly pride now marking me as common. Memories of any comment ever made within earshot regarding my appearance, my personality, my manhood came flooding to me all at once, and I felt crushed by my own inadequacy; a boy feeling a man's shame. My life had started and ended in that single instant, framed by that perfect wedding of light and shadow, that essential and flawless coalition of space and time. I had been trapped, knowing that my soul was to be forevermore dominated by this presence and knowing with equal certainty that I was not brave enough to even look at the perfect face of my conqueror. My extremities, fatally behind in their comprehension, finally understood the gravity of the situation and had just begun to carry me, head still swimming, from the most eternal five seconds of my life under the spell of this wondrous and terrible being when the hitherto unimportant man to her right spoke and began walking away, down the bridge, towards the campsite that lay across the stream from our own. My treacherous limbs refroze, and I watched, unmoving and unblinking, as the small frame came to life under the hideous, oversized flannel, moving with a sudden vivacity that caused my heart's pounding to fill my bright red ears. Her eyes still focused on an animatedly frustrated fisherman who had carelessly spilled the contents of his cooler onto the ground beside him, she began moving away from me, tracing the fingertips of her left hand along the railing of the bridge, causing my chest to become painfully tight with fear and the overwhelming desire to scoop that hand up in my own to protect it from the splinters I knew had been waiting patiently on the bridge for this moment, rogue entities in the woodwork that had been preparing since their formation to strike pain into this sacred interaction, destroying its purity forever. Mercifully, the bridge allowed for no such catastrophe, and as she reached the end of the walkway, unpierced and

perfect, the rebellious breath that I had not realized I was holding forced itself from my lungs in the single most grating sound ever produced. She heard the sound, too, and against the wishes of every atom in my body she turned. At once, every understanding I had held in those moments about her, about beauty, about perfection, and, indeed, about life, was destroyed and scattered beyond oblivion. As her shimmering hazel eyes met my unworthy blue, a smile crept to her thin lips, tugging at and changing the shape of the dark purple birthmark that painted the right side of her face from cheekbone to nose to jaw. With a wave of total euphoria, I understood that she was as imperfect as I, and nothing I had seen before and nothing I have encountered since can compare to how beautiful her imperfection made her to me in that moment on the best bridge in the world.