

The brown bag fit tight in Rob's rough hands. He swung open his car door, eyes bloodshot, and hair falling off in droves as his balding took full form. The car started, and he drove out of the Queen City liquor store parking lot. The sun beat onto his pale white skin, as a swerve caught life in the yanking of the wheel. The tires pounded against the asphalt, and a barrage of horns roared at him with every unnecessary jerk and swing of his car. Waving them off like flies on fruit, Rob concentrated on the white and yellow line. Doing everything in his power to stay in between of them. Cars continued to honk and pass him in a wave of anger and disgust. The wobbling of his tires, and drifting slightly left and snapping back right, told them all they needed to know.

The cars anxiously trying to zoom past Rob all wished the same thing, that he'd be gone. It didn't matter if he drank himself into the grave or drove his car into a telephone pole. They didn't care; they only wanted the black stain of their prestigious white suburbs to be gone before he caused more trouble. The newly formed town drunk was like the black plague, a roach that wouldn't die. The idea of helping Rob never crossed their minds. Their pride wouldn't allow it. To soil their good name for him, never. He was beneath them, and they didn't help the peasants.

Rob cruised down the main drag and across the Luther Bridge. A black girl walked along the sidewalk, towards their part of town. It was an unwritten rule, no minorities, especially blacks crossed the Luther Bridge. It served as the last great defense of the divide. By no means did Rob consider himself a racist, but everyone knew this part of town belonged to the elite class, and for the sake of order and righteousness, it needed to stay that way. It's how the world worked. It just made sense for them to be where they were and the others not to be.

His red eyes glared through his dirty windshield and focused his uncontrollable rage on the girl. She couldn't have been older than 15, but that meant little to him or the others on the white side of town. Rob rolled down his window like so many before him and so many after

would. “Get the hell out of here you black. “This ain’t your part of town,” his words slurred together. The girl didn’t budge; the words ricocheted off her and into the hate-filled air around her. Her lack of response tore at Rob’s lasting anger as she appeared in his rearview mirror.

“Why don’t you just jump off and kill yourself, I’m sure you won’t be missed,” he mumbled to himself. Finishing the last leg of his drive, the buzz he coveted began to fade, and the sober realization settled into his mind. Oh, how he hated to be sober, to allow his past to sink back into his brain, to relive those horrendous days. No, he couldn’t bear the pain. Reaching for the bottle in the passenger seat, he clutched it tight against his chest. The touch soothed him and put a calm over his body.

Sorting through his keys, the lock squeezed open, and Rob slithered through the front door. His head pounded as he downed three Advil and pressed play on his answering machine. Nothing. His eyes shifted around the house. It was disgusting. Empty beer bottles littered the floor, trash was building its own community in the corner, fast food was rioting on the table and couch, and his T.V. blared in the background. The Advil worked on cue and the redness in his eyes, transformed into a slight leak from his eyes. A few tears found life and collapsed to the floor. He walked over to the last fragment of his sanity. A three by five portrait of his wife and son. Smiles engulfed their faces, and he tried to remember that day of bliss, but his hate-filled his heart wouldn’t allow it.

It’d been over two months since his wife left him. He couldn’t blame her for going, he would have left too if the roles were reversed. But that only turned him to the bottle more frequently and with a vicious desire to drink with a purpose. The portrait hung in his hand, like weight he could no longer hold. As the anger engulfed whatever rational thought he had left, he sent the picture into the nearby wall, with all of his remaining hate and anguish. The portrait

collided with the drywall and shattered in multiple pieces. Heavy breathing escaped Rob's gorilla-like figure, and the tears were replaced with something he wished he'd done a long time ago. The girl from the bridge sparked an idea in him, which was spreading throughout his blood. Rob grabbed his keys and took off on foot, to see the black girl on his side of town.

Nai continued her pacing up and down the bridge. Her phone loosely residing in her hand only offered a musical distraction from the onslaught of harassment she received from each car that drove by. Each white driver provided a wave of racial slurs and hated words. She was surprised the whites didn't call the cops, but after an hour she concluded they were either cowards, or would never bother with what they considered trash. The hot summer sun beat against her dark skin, her hair short and natural, and eyes wide at the realization of the world. She collapsed against the bridge railing. Nai wanted to cry, to have the world hear her pain and suffering. To beg someone to make a change, to be the difference, but she knew the way the world worked. At age 15, there was no one left who cared about her, and her own people could never make the difference she longed for. Her father was never in her life, her mother seesawed with drug bangers, and now, her brother.

A few tears trickled from her eyes, but she quickly wiped them away. This was the only option; she continued to tell herself. No one was coming to stop her. The cars driving by wished for it, and now she would make it a reality. A shame, she thought, no police or news camera, the whites even jacked this up for her. *Doesn't matter* she eventually convinced herself. The town will see this one way or another. Nai felt the full concrete against her soft kind hands, she looked over the edge of Luther Bridge. 50 feet high and a busy street underneath. *This'll make the news*, she thought. They will know. Nai engulfed a large breath of air, her confidence. She pulled her

self over the divider and stood on the little ledge. The only thing that kept her from falling to her death was her grip on the cement divider.

Footsteps pounded into the hard paved sidewalk, sweat poured off Rob's face in droves, and his shirt looked like he went swimming in it. His steps were inconsistent with a nervous hinge. *Could he really do it*, the thought intrigued him? Almost a guilty pleasure, but was it right? Each muscle contraction took him another step closer. After 30 minutes, he realized he wouldn't know for sure until he got there. It would all happen in the moment. No amount of planning or talking himself into it or out would turn him one way or another. He would decide in the moment, which made it all more enticing.

Approaching Luther Bridge, Rob saw the same girl from earlier. She was different this time, not pacing, but standing still. As he got closer, it was clear to see what was going on. He laughed to himself. The irony. Cars continued to whiz by, none stopped, but they continued to yell. Each step closer, he heard a different word, a different name, and it made him cringe. He paused for a second. The girl in his view, standing on the wrong side of the divider. He was sober, for almost an hour, which was a new record he was setting with each passing second. For the first time in over a year, he wiped away the fog of his eyes and absorbed the picture in front of him. A little over an hour ago, he was a passing car, yelling at an innocent girl, for what, why? How disgusting of a person had he become?

Rob mopped off the sweat from his face and drew in a long breath. Alcohol still lingered on his breath, and he threw in a quick mint. Walking onto the bridge sidewalk, he brushed back whatever hair remained, and he tried to suck in his gut. He took a quick glance at the girl; she didn't look afraid, she looked steadfast with a face that had no other options. Rob stopped-maybe 20 feet away. The girl hadn't noticed him yet, and he thought about turning back. *What the hell*

*can I do for this girl, he thought? Who am I to talk to her? God, what if I scare her and she falls by accident?* Rob turned away from her and took a few steps. The thought of his son reappeared in his hazy mind of decisions. *God, Noah, I know what you would do if you were in my position. Do it for Noah.* Rob pulled his face from the ground, cleaned his sniveling noise, and regained his composure.

“Hey,” Rob broke out awkwardly. “You know, you’re on the wrong side of the sidewalk, you might want to think about hopping back over.” Nai ignored him. “It’s only a suggestion, but hey don’t let me tell you how to live your life.” Rob decided to take the funny approach, even though no one ever considered him the funny type.

“Don’t worry,” she scolded back, anger filled her words. “I don’t need suggestions from you. You can just keep walking, nothing to see here.”

“Well I’m going to give you a little advice, I’m not a very good listener. It’s part of the reason my wife left me.” Rob waited for a reaction but received none. “If you don’t mind, I’m slightly out of shape and very winded, I’m going to take a seat right here.” Rob collapsed, leaning against the cement divider, tilting his head up and admiring the beauty of the sky.

For a few minutes, Nai stood on one side of the divider and Rob the other. The rumbling from the cars quieted. Rob was sure they wanted to stop and see how it would all play out, but he knew they wouldn’t. Their lives were too important and their time too precious. Rob threw a couple of dirty looks at the cars passing by; they hated him as much as they did the girl. The sun continued to leak over his skin, and he tried to look back at the girl, but didn’t want to startle her. “So what are you doing out here?”

“Is it not obvious,” she taunted him.

“Please, I’m a little slow. Can you enlighten men?”

“I’m going to kill myself.” The words hung in the air, and for the first time she knew she was going to do it. It was real now.

“And why would you do that? What are you like 13 or 14? Don’t you think you are a little young for this? Wait another decade when you truly find out how cruel this world can be.” A quick laugh escaped his mouth.

“It’s the same with all of you whites. It’s just a giant game, and we are the one at your expense. No, not anymore, not today.”

Rob slowly picked himself up from the ground, turned around and rested his elbows on the divider. Cheeks sunk into his hands, and he looked dully at her. For the first time, she looked back. “Oh, this is a race thing is it? So how is splattering your body onto cars below going to help empower the blacks over the whites?” For a second Nai was taken back. She had her opportunity. He was no reporter, but he would get her story out. This overweight middle aged balding man would be the one to tell her story. It was better than nothing.

“Have you heard of the Arab Spring?” Rob nodded, he had. “It all started with one man lighting himself on fire in Tunisia when the government destroyed his cart. He protested with his life, and it spread throughout the entire Middle East and North Africa. My death here will be like that Tunisian man.”

“Alright girl, I’ll play along,” Rob popped another mint in his mouth, he could tell she had smelt the alcohol that lingered on him. “What is your protest? What is so important to you that you are willing to take your own life?”

“They killed my brother two weeks ago.” Rob almost fell backward, he wasn’t ready for that. He wasn’t ready for today. For this girl, ready to kill herself to represent the suffering of her people. “He was murdered by two white police pigs.” He could feel the hate in her voice, and the resolve in what she was about to do. “They murdered an innocent man because he had his phone in his hand and they thought it was a gun. Shoot first, don’t ask questions. Have you ever been on the other side of town? No one gives a shit what happens to us over there. While you live in your big houses, and drive fancy cars on paved roads, we fight every day and now and then the white pigs come over and lay down the law. What else am I supposed to do in this unjust world we live in?”

Rob was quiet, he hadn’t the faintest idea in how to respond, but he felt her pain. Not the tragedy she was enduring, but the misery of loss. With the comfort of one who can never understand, but feel the pain of all pains, he placed his hand on her shoulder. “I am sorry.” He couldn’t find any other words to speak. He stared at her face, and she illuminated strength. She only showed courage. “What about your parents, the rest of your family? I’m sorry about your brother, I’m sorry this world is unfair, but what about them?” Rob was asking himself the same questions.

“What about them,” she shot back? “I never knew my father, and my mother is a do drugs get clean, rinse and repeat woman. She won’t know I’m gone until she turns on the evening news.”

“So that’s it then, you’re just going to call it quits, cause of a couple of piece of shit pigs?” He found a type of assertion in himself, he hadn’t experienced since before the accident, since before the alcohol warped his mind. “Let them win by killing yourself. You actually think you are going to start the black spring by killing yourself in a white neighborhood?”

“What other choice do I have,” she countered? “Do you know what the statistics are for a low income, low education, broken household in the ghettos? Damn charts got me pegged getting pregnant next year. 100% I’ll have two kids before I’m legally allowed to drink. Don’t worry if I can dodge those bullets, I’ll have to dodge the literal ones from the cops who gun us down like wild animals. Oh, don’t forget about the black on black crime. Want me to stop there?” She didn’t give Rob a chance to speak. “Please don’t forget about option c and d: prison, and drugs. My life has been laid out since the day I was born when my father was nowhere to be found. So it looks like this is my only shot at inspiring people to take action, to do something, and you are going to be the one to tell my story.”

It felt like a bat slammed against Rob’s brain. His eyes all but rolled back into his head. He knew what she was saying was legitimate. That meant she’d never get off the bridge alive. There were no words that would keep her from jumping, and she wanted him to tell her story. *Damn did she even realize why I came back to the bridge?* He didn’t even know her name. Rob’s face became heavy with worry, and she could see the panic in his eyes. He took a step back, then the words that hurt the most penetrated his ears. Jump followed by the N-word yelled a passing car. Angry tears flowed from his red face when Nai turned around.

“You think you are better than them,” she scolded him like a boy who knew he messed up. “I heard what you said when you drove by, I have heard every word uttered my way. It’s clear as day to see what I am doing here, and nobody has tried to stop me. No cops called to try and talk me down. If anything people have been encouraging it. How messed up is that.” Innocence escaped her face for the first time. He could see someone scared and alone. An innocent girl, getting screwed by the world when she hadn’t done anything wrong. It was at that moment that Rob made up his mind. There was no question of what he would do next.



He walked back towards her, rolled his out of shape body over the divider and stood next to her, looking at his death. A rush of panic and serendipity ran along his skin. His face was a mixture of feelings, but in the end it was clear with a thick layer of confusion. Nai looked at him just as confused, but anger still flowed through her veins. It only intensified as this white jack-ass stood next to her. “What, you going to kill yourself now too. Did you just realize you are just as bad as everybody else?”

Rob took the words to his gut, but when he turned his face to hers, he was calm and in control. “I’d ask you to push me, take your anger out on the white men who do nothing when justice is an option. But I know you’re not a killer, that’s why you’re here. Cause you hate death and humans taking life from one another. You want peace.” Rob wiggled his body on the small ledge until he was sitting and his arms wrapped around a pillar. “You are right about me though. I’m just like everyone else. I didn’t come back to the bridge after seeing you to talk to you or anything like that. Frankly, I didn’t think you’d still be here.” Nai was quiet; she wanted to know why. “I came here to kill myself.”

Nai looked down at him and the sadness painting his face. She felt pity for him and saw how broken of a man he was. The least she could do was hear what he had to say. She’d be a hypocrite otherwise. She hated herself for it, but she placed her left hand on his right shoulder like he did to her. “What happened to you? I know you aren’t like this because of what I said. I smelt the alcohol on your breath, and when you drove by, the slurring anger in your words. What drove you to drink? What drove you to want to take your life?”

The comfort from her hand relaxed Rob. Cars continued to drive by, fewer as the day drifted to a close. None stopped, and his throat begged for the burn of liquor. He wouldn’t dare look up at her. He lacked the courage. All the therapy, all of the counseling, all the calls, and

support from family and friends over months and months and he couldn't open up. Or wouldn't, he didn't know. It was the liquor that did the trick. Better than beer or wine, better than his wife. It was his escape from the hell his life had become, and in doing so, it ruined him for everything that he was worth. Now at the edge of death, the words felt like they would float with ease. A total stranger who only shared the loss of someone so dear, it made the rest of living a daily hell. The girl he'd known for only 20 minutes, was the only one who could understand what brought him to the edge of the bridge.

“It all started a little over a year ago. The alcohol, the abysmal relationship with my wife, and the suicidal thoughts that manifest over time and grew stronger in the darkness of my mind until I reached the pinnacle. Which is here. I was out back grilling, we had a lot of friends over. It was a nice summer day, much like today. My wife was talking to the other wives, and the men huddled around the grill or T.V. The kids, 12 of them that day, were everywhere. Couldn't keep'em still if you tried.” His voice was freakily calm, painting the portrait like snapshots from that exact day. Nai felt there. She saw herself on the back porch, smoking and joking with men she despised, but not in that moment. She felt their kindness, and not their wickedness.

“We weren't bad parents,” Rob continued. “Just relaxing, while the kids danced in the summer sun, ran through the small stream in the backyard. Just any regular day.” His voice tightened up almost choking on what he was going to say. “I heard the scream, the scream echoes in my every waking thought. I can even hear it now.” Nai could too. “It screamed “help!” followed by hysteria. I dropped everything and ran as fast as I could to the sound. But when I arrived, I was too late. My baby boy, dead on our living room floor. He was eating a hot dog, bite off too much, and closed up his airway. He was only seven.” Tears flooded from his face,

and he began sobbing uncontrollably. “I pounded on his chest, begged him to come back, but by the time the ambulance arrived, he was gone.”

Nai felt the pain etched in each word he spoke, she felt his sorrow and understood his torment. Rob twisted his face to meet her eyes that were now red, with tears of her own. “It was a damn hot dog. A hot dog killed my little boy.” He fought through the heart-wrenching pain. “I was never the same after that. I couldn’t be, I wanted to die with my boy. Alcohol was the only thing that could suppress the thoughts, the only thing that could block everything out. It drove my wife insane. She was in just as much pain, and I couldn’t do a damn thing to help her. I pushed her away. I drove her away with my drunken state. She did her best, I give her credit for staying around as long as she did. I got fired from my job six months ago, I put on 40 pounds, and I finally pushed her to the edge where she left too. I came to the bridge today because what else do I have. Nothing, I only want my boy.”

The sun started its usual decent, and Nai followed it, sitting next to Rob. She rested her head on his shoulder and rubbed his back. The crying continued for a few minutes, and she let him have his moment. She couldn’t figure it out. She didn’t necessarily hate white people, they just hadn’t always been kind to her or helped her. And all the ones today wanted her to jump, and the man she was comforting now was no different from the rest. Spewing nasty words to her. She had this hate for all of these men who didn’t help and only made her life hell. But this stranger, wrapped in her arm felt the grief that haunted her sleep. He didn’t see her color anymore. He only recognized her pain. And that was it; they were humans, and nothing else really mattered. In their unfathomable state of loss, the world brought them together. What she perceived as an enemy, was the only one who could understand her.

“You know,” Rob dug his face out of his arms, and the tears started to dry. “I’ve never told anyone that story. I’ve never been able to speak of my son’s death. I don’t know why I’ve been able to speak now, but thank you for listening. I needed it.” They were quiet a minute, absorbing each other’s comforting presence.

“What was your son’s name?”

“Noah, what was your brothers?”

“Martin”

The clouds drifted in front of the fading sun as a big shadow cast over Rob and Nia. They sat at the edge of the bridge, feet dangling and mouths moving. For an hour they talked, leaving no stone untouched. Racial issues, police brutality, income inequality, and the deteriorating state of the educational system. In the end, the one thing that brought them together and broke their perceived barriers was the mutual loss they endured and the desire to end their lives. A gentle breeze shifted in the air and fit like a blanket over their bodies. Their muscles relaxed, and eyes grew heavy. The sadness they held onto weighed down their souls.

Nai looked over to Rob, whose eyes were fixated on the sunset that was about to come. “Is it ever possible to move on from a loved one’s death? Does moving on require forgetting.” Her eyes shook in fear of forgetting her brother.

“It is possible to exit the endless suffering,” Rob replied. “I think you have to act in a way that constantly impresses them. To make them proud, and hold them close to your heart.” Nai looked at him and saw how calm he was as if everything was going to be okay. “But don’t get me wrong,” he continued. “You have to be strong, have a life worth living, and know your

purpose. These are the things I no longer have.” She could feel Rob’s energy and felt his sadness and hate disappear. Instead, it was replaced with acceptance.

Loud, obnoxious police sirens echoed down the road. Their tires burned against the asphalt as they slammed on the brakes. Rob and Nia booth turned to see... Finally the audience she desperately desired. She stood up, and Rob followed suit. Two police officers approached with caution, one black the other white. They shouted in as calm of a way as one can shout. Telling them to remain calm, and not to move.

“I’m ready,” Nai said. Her whole body shaking as adrenaline poured through her blood. “My audience is here.”

“Don’t,” Rob spoke with softness. Taking the form of a warm hug, when stepping inside from the cold. Nai snapped at him, unsure why he was changing his approach to their situation. “Look kid, you’re special, insanely smart, and I hear your purpose with a side of passion in every word you utter. That Tunisian man, never heard of him. But you, you got brains. Don’t throw it away and let them win.” Nai curled her fingers, and her breathing intensified. She was going to do it, and nothing he could say would change it. “When Martin looks down at his beautiful sister, he doesn’t want to see her splattered like a tomato on Clarkson Boulevard. He wants to see her being the difference, not a number in all of the lives we lost.”

Nai took a step away from him, angry tears in her eyes. The police were moving in. She knew they would reach out and grab her. They didn’t need a suicide on this side of town. She needed to act now. “I’m doing this. You can join me or tell my story,” conviction fluttered from her mouth.

“Okay,” Rob replied not wanting to push her any further. “Well before you jump, can you tell me your name?”

“Nia Williams.”

“What a beautiful name, mine is Robin W. King.”

The police closed in, only a few meters away. Nai took a quick glance at them; she needed to do it now. Her eyes darted back at Rob, “goodbye.” She pushed off the divider and plunged into the open abyss. She held her breath and closed her eyes. In the next moment, she felt her body being ripped back, with a pull from Hercules. Her eyes jolted open. Rob jumped after her, using all the strength he had, he yanked her body up against the divider as he fell off the bridge. The policemen rushed in and secured Nai, but jerked their heads away as Rob’s body exploded on the pavement. Shock whipped Nai’s face clean, and the policemen dragged her onto the bridge.

An hour later, ambulances, dozens of news crews, and more police covered the bridge. A special team worked down below on Rob’s body. Nai waited alone in the back of an ambulance. The doors were wide as she sat on the edge and looked into the dark sky. News crews fought to get by the police and see her. They needed to know what happened, obsessed with the thought of reporting a suicide in this picture-perfect town.

Nai took a deep breath and spoke quietly to herself. “I will tell them your story, Robin. I will tell them the story of all the lives we take. And Robin, I will live mine.”