

14. THE BRIDGE DISASTER

He saw her walk in with her friends. All of them had that same fresh-faced look, the confidence of knowing too little about the moment, and the desire to know everything.

She was particularly appealing. She wrapped her svelte body around the chair and seemed to twist acrobatically in place. Immediately, he wanted to approach her, to say something provocative to her so that he could watch her frosted lips slide themselves around some equally enticing words. Her long blonde hair was straight and fell in bangs on her forehead. On some angles, the hair obscured her face. There was something overwhelming about this look.

He thought it unusual that he waited so long to say something. He seemed transfixed in his place. He watched her frolic with her friends. The more that he watched, the more that he sense his own paralysis. There was a cruelty to his gaze, almost as if he was claiming her for himself. But he believed that he was sharing in her splendor.

She and her friends all seemed oblivious to the moment. They could have just as easily been sitting at the mall in front of a chain store or outside at a city park. They took little notice of those around them except for the bartender. They enjoyed their own company, but more than that, they celebrated their own insularity, as if the only ones who would make it through their wall of smugness were other like sorts who accepted their immunity from the world.

This vision was all Roger's creation. But he hated to be proved wrong. Perhaps, their immense sense of self-satisfaction put him off. He consoled himself in his drink. And he waited too long to get another.

His princess did look over at him. But Roger couldn't be sure if she was just observing the sites. So he did nothing. He even turned away for a moment. He was hardly close enough to get a clear shot.

Roger remained in his limbo. For him it offered his own sense of satisfaction. And he accepted just that. It didn't make him pathetic. And he hardly felt helpless. He was participating in his own pleasure with regards to the scene.

He wanted to make contact with something in his immediacy that could help distract him from the fact that he let the girls disappear in the background. What could make him feel uplifting in his surroundings. He felt that he has a unique understanding of where he was. He analyze every song played on the sound system to get a clearer understanding of the present. He wasn't getting lost in his expectations. He was seeing this place for just what it was. Any dreams that he had for the night were abruptly shattered confronting the instantaneity.

He knew where he was. This tentative rest stop along the way to something bigger assumed that it was the beacon of a new culture. The girls had a vague notion of this reputation. But they know little about the details and hardly cared. If they were at the center of some new chicness, so be it. They would accept the benefits of their location.

Roger tried to take it all in. He still believed that his realization might offer him motivation to act. Tonight he faced a hesitation that was so unlike him. It made him embarrassed to admit what he did see. As if his knowledge only made him less inclined to action. He was seeing himself frozen in time. All his potential to act was being crystalized in a sovereign intention. And the determination seemed to wave back at him.

He needed another drink. He needed to throw himself into the moment. But what did he

have to offer tonight. His wit was halted in mid-form. His mind was beset by his own incapability. His excitement made him jumpy.

In the breach, he let himself become undone. An unknown rival discovered the boldness that was so lacking in Roger. He made his way through the place with one intention in mind. He was going to make himself know to Roger's beloved. Roger watched as he casually put his hand on her shoulder. She touched his hand. She laughed at all his silly jokes. It was too far gone for him ever to do a thing.

Roger became tenser as he watched them together. Their every gesture seemed to ring with twice the volume under his view.

She pushed herself into him. He shaped her body to fit with his. They both swayed to the pulsating beat. He imagined that he heard her sigh. He could see her catch her breath.

He stepped forward then back. He was part of this scene. But he was afraid of what was happening right before him. His blood boiled. He could feel a wave of anger pass over him. He clenched his fist.

There were still the other girls sitting on their stools. But she was standing so close to him. It would have take him only a few steps to reach her and whisper in her ear.

"He's a creep. Look at him."

He was too perfect. Too self-effacing. Brashly over-confident. Roger was seeing himself in action. Only this time it was a weak imitation of himself. That hurt him more.

He wanted to caress her face. He wanted to hold her hand. He wanted to pull her body close to his. He wasn't good at jealousy. He was getting caught up in what was going on before him. It brought out all his minor failings and made this time seemed like a significant defeat.

How could he really distinguish this girl from her friends? She had been the most active. She seemed to take the initiative. He was drawn to her spunk. And now all those things were being cut short by his rival's moves.

What had they said to each other that made her fall so easily in his arms. Just the pure sexual energy.

This was Roger's game. He had infuriated loads of other guys, even his friends, by doing this kind of thing. He didn't care about the night. Or even the girl. He was on the hunt. And he needed to win. That was what he resented most. This was his bar. And this clown looked as if he had dressed himself from one of those magazine ads on how to be cool and in the know.

Roger posed for himself in the bar mirror. He wanted to reassure himself that he had it. But whatever it was, it wasn't amounting to a roll of pennies.

Roger was getting it all wrong. He was trying to analyze the situation as if he could devise a method. He already had a method. He was seeing a side of himself that he took for granted. But when he looked at himself from the outside, he felt disgusted.

All his ruminating proved nothing to him. It wasn't as if he wanted to take stock of the situation. A weaker man might have used the night to get really blitzed. And someone with more self-reflection would have seen through the nonsense. Roger remained with his predicament. He was the car stuck in the mud just spinning his wheels. The moment that he got a little traction, he dug in again. He was going nowhere.

His fist was clenched even tighter. He let the feeling grip him from the inside. He looked

around the room a couple of times in the hope that he could find some other reference point. It didn't help that he had ventured out on his own. There was no one to console him. He remained with his sense of defeat.

He didn't want to leave. He didn't want to give in to his rival. But the girl was back with her friend, and she was bragging about her success. They watched the guy walk away, and they all chuckled.

"What is the difference between seeing a disaster and actually being able to do something to stop it?"

"What are you talking about, Patrick?"

Roger was just getting over his hangover. He wasn't in the mood to solve one of Patrick's puzzles.

"I'm not kidding. This is a serious question. Fortune tellers and photographers see disasters with their own eyes. But they just alert the public to what is happening. They really do nothing to prevent the catastrophes from unfolding."

"At least, a fortune teller gives you a warning."

"But if they really cared, they wouldn't just be bystanders. Sometimes the worst thing about a disaster is not the initial impact. It's the aftermath."

"So what are you proposing?"

"I'm just making an observation. It's something to think about."

"So which are we?"

"What do you mean?"

"Are we spectators, or are we part of the game?"

"I feel like a spectator. But everything that I do seems to end in disaster."

"The internet bride."

"Whatever. That was a good idea. It just cost too much."

"Never trust what you can't see."

"Never trust what you can't touch."

"Never touch what you can't trust."

"You're running out of luck? Not your regular chipper self?"

"I had a super-terrible night. Look at me!"

"One night. What's the big deal. Sweat it out, and then hit the clubs tonight."

"I feel as if I hit an impasse."

"You're playing fortune teller."

"Something like that."

"Tell me about the one that got away."

"There was never any it to get away."

"What does that mean?"

"I was that spectator that you were talking about."

"You, you're always the life of the party."

"Not last night. Maybe not ever again."

"Did someone put a spell on you?"

"I'm not really into that supernatural shit. But something came over me. Like the flu of the soul."

“It’s not like you to want to get that deep.”

“Maybe I’ve been such a dick to women in the past that it all finally caught up with me.”

“Good karma, bad karma.”

“More like some kind of goo that affects the body. A mold, or something from outer space. I only know that the planets won’t align for me anymore.”

“You’re reading too much into one night.”

“I felt it. I felt it come over me!”

Roger is feeling a little desperate after his disaster. He thinks that it might be a good idea to let things cool for a while.

“You’re telling me that you don’t want to go out.”

“I’m cashed out, brother.”

“That never stopped you before.”

“I don’t want to go out on a limb.”

“I’m buying.”

“I’m still at my limit.”

“Are you trying to tell me something?”

“I don’t think that I’m going improve my lot by drowning in my sorrows in alcohol.”

“It’s not as if you even knew the girl.”

“It’s the principle of the matter.”

“What principle? What goes up must come down?”

“What goes down must stay down?”

“Quit being a sad sack!”

“Let me just stew in my emotions for a while.”

“You let things stew, and you end up being a drowning victim. Get out there, and spread your wings.”

“If I start drinking at home, is that such a big deal?”

“I’m not buying for you to drink at home.”

“Don’t we have a case in the fridge.”

“Those are my beer. And you can’t have any.”

“You’ll buy me drinks if we go out, but you won’t let me take your beer.”

“I don’t want to deal with a drunk passed out in the middle of my apartment. Besides, I’m not that excited about cleaning up beer cans in the morning.”

“Why don’t you just buy me dinner, and I’ll think about going out to a bar with you afterwards?”

“I’ll beat you if you don’t go out with me for drinks later.”

“You’ll beat me? You couldn’t even beat my little brother.”

“You have a little brother.”

“No, but if I did, he could smack you down.”

“Let’s get out of here.”

Patrick and Roger ended up drinking too much at dinner so it was pretty much a no go following up at the clubs.

“Roger, you stinking sonofabitch!”

“Are you going to give me the beating that I deserve?”

“If I can stand long enough.”

“You’re not driving tonight.”

“Neither of us is. I ordered a cab.”

“Both of them had sobered a little by the time that they made it home.

“We should have gone out anyway.”

“Then we’d be crawling home.”

“I’m not doing that bad.”

At that moment, Patrick just falls down.

“I’ll get the coffee.”

After a little coffee, Patrick started to become a little more coherent.

“You shouldn’t feel so badly. You can change.”

“It’s not like I can take lessons to change my personality. I know that they teach you that kind of shit in your psychology class. But real life ain’t like that.”

“You’re the one who was doubting yourself. Like it was no longer automatic.”

“You can’t go back to being your friendly neighborhood pick-up artist.”

“Your making me sound like some kind of monster.”

“You can’t help yourself. This power comes over you, and this impulse just takes over.”

“More shit from the classroom? Or is it Hollywood?”

“Doesn’t it seem pretty obvious.”

“So what do you want me to do about it.”

“What do you think that you can do about it?”

“I can’t enter some kind of program. It’s not like I can be cured.”

“But you can focus your skills differently.”

“It’s not something that I can control consciously. I just get in the zone, and it comes naturally.”

“Maybe you could work to shift your perceptions.”

“Go for girls in red dresses.”

“Learn to moderate your impulses. Don’t feel that you have to follow through with every desire that you feel. Then you won’t be so frustrated when things don’t work out.”

“I know what I’ve got. And if I start wasting my talent, it’s only going to be harder to get on track when I really need it.”

“Spoken like a true psychotic.”

“I’m not scaring little children.”

“You may not know your limits.”

“Who really does? You let the situation guide you. Let it take you places that you’ve never been before.”

“But you certainly can direct those impulses.”

“What are you trying to get me to say? That I can use my powers for good as well as evil.”

“You shouldn’t mock me so.”

“You’re trying to do the impossible.”

“What is that?”

“You can’t create humanity. You can only observe it.”

“I can’t change it.”

“You can change some things. The brand of coffee that you buy. Where you go on vacation. But you can’t affect everything.”

“You start small. And then you work on bigger things.”

“That could be where you get over your head. Like getting knocked down by a big wave.”

“What’s the alternative?”

“Like I’ve been saying all along: do what comes naturally.”

“What if you naturally act like an asshole?”

“You can always fine tune things if you need to.”

“If you can fine tune things, then you should be able to change course in midstream.”

“Yeah, but you don’t want to mess with a good thing.”

“You don’t know that it’s a good thing until it’s gone. And then you’re goose is really cooked.”

“You still haven’t made your point. It’s one thing to be crafty with your words. But it hardly means that there’s anything holding together your argument.”

“Let take it from another point of view. Do you think that you could teach me your method?”

“I’d probably need a lot more to work with just to make it happen. But you could watch and learn.”

“I’ve been watching you for years. I still don’t know how you do it.”

“So you admire my style.”

“In a manner of speaking.”

“What’s the problem?”

“I keep wondering about the aftertaste.”

“What’s that?”

“You just never seem to feel any remorse for acting like a real jerk.”

“First, you’re complementing my moves, then you’re questioning my intent. Which way is it?”

“I think that you have some basic skills. But you need to sharpen the follow-through.”

“You’re talking as if you’re my basketball coach.”

“Well, if you’re going in for a lay up, and you slip on your own sweat, then maybe you’re feeling a little too nervous about your game.”

“I’m not the one who’s nervous.”

“What about the other day?”

“That was an accident. And I’m over that kind of thing.”

“Well, you’ve got to quit being your own worst enemy.”

“What’s the fuss?”

“How many of the women that you meet ever get back with you? You don’t know how sustain anything long term.”

“I’m not looking for a Ukrainian bride. I don’t even have enough money to get married.”

“Maybe if you had something a little more steady in your life, you could commit yourself to getting job. Or at least getting back to school.”

“You’re going all serious on me.”

“You were the one who came me with a serious problem.”

“Then we’re going to need a real solution.”

“You’re trying to turn me into you.”

“What would you have me do? I’m trying to share everything that I know with you.”

“I’m not going to consent to being one of your experiments from Psychology class.”

“You have to play the odds in your favor.”

“I do what works. Can I be more certain than that?”

“You can make thing work on the short term. But what about the full term?”

“I can’t wait around for the full time.”

“What are you afraid of? That someone is going to call you on your front?”

“I’m not going to get that technical about it.”

Patrick was carrying the newspaper when he went to Roger’s room.

“I’m not interested in the news.”

“This is really freaky. There was a bridge that collapsed in Maryland. This bridge over the Potomac.”

“The whole thing?”

“Just part of the bridge near the Maryland side. They’ve cut down on the highway financing. And bridge inspections have suffered.”

“I thought that it was Virginia who had cut down on highway funding.”

“It’s all the same. They could have prevented the disaster if they had used their resources.”

“So you really go in for that theory of yours.”

“I’ve tried to warn you all this time. It’s much better to avoid a disaster than have to clean up after one.”

“So much easier said than done.”

Patrick is insistent, “It’s important to take action when you can.”

“But do you feel safe?”

“That’s not the point. Every second of our lives we’re testing some element of our security. We drive over a bridge. We take a plane ride. We open a package of cereal that we’ve bought in the store. There is always something that could go wrong.”

“So you live on faith.”

“A faith that is itself based on oversight. Some communities make more of effort to make sure that things are all right.”

“You can be too careful.”

“That kind of attitude could be part of the problem.”

“So you are ready to go back to your old ways.”

“I haven’t quite said that. But I haven’t settled on wearing a helmet and safety glasses to every event that I attend.”

“Precautions are worthwhile when used sensibly.”

“I just imagine you facing the world in a rubber suit.”

“If that is the world that I am facing, I am ready to prepare myself.”

“You prevent yourself from having any fun.”

“You can’t act dumbfounded when the consequences clearly don’t go your way.”

“So you’re advising me to wrap myself in rubber.”

“You have to do something if you’re going to engage in dangerous activity. Don’t just turn around, and pretend that nothing happened.”

“I don’t want to save my life until I’m about to die.”

“You don’t want to bring on a premature death either.”

“What’s the big deal. It’s not as if your life means all that much stacked up against the universe.”

“We’ve asked this question before. The universe can’t come to knowledge by itself.”

“Who do you think you are, the creator?”

“For now, I’m the creator of this little tiny corner.”

Patrick wasn’t sure if he was really helping. He had started off with the idea of imparting some kind of knowledge to Roger. But now it seemed if Roger just wanted to let go. And there was really nothing that Patrick could do about it.

“You fell off the wagon?”

“I was never on the wagon. So let’s go get some drinks.”

Patrick wasn’t so sure that he liked the old Roger back. But he was ready to give it a try. After all, he needed someone to lead the adventure. He would be really disappointed if they both ended up passed out again after a big meal at a restaurant.

Things seemed to be going quite well until Roger settled down with a cutie named Jennifer. Before he really had gotten anywhere, he invited his friend over.

“I’m not really here to advise you.”

“I didn’t think that you were. But Jennifer and I are in the midst of an argument.”

“Roger, it’s not really an argument. I just don’t think that I need some kind of deep reason why I come here.”

“You may just end up here for whatever reason. But what you do while you’re here may have deep consequences.”

Patrick tries to chime in, “Like the bridge disaster that we were talking about today.”

Jennifer asks, “What bridge disaster?”

“The bridge collapse over the Potomac. But that’s not really important. It’s more the idea that counts. What you do here could have massive consequences for your life.”

“I came here to meet some cute guys.”

“But what you call cute may be the very thing that’s messing you up.”

“A tight butt is a tight butt.”

“If you come here just to have fun, your fun could end biting you back.”

Patrick is only listening and is amazed.

“I don’t come here to think about who I am. I come here to forget who I am.”

“But you act in a way that is based on how you believe things to be.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re hot. Guys see you that way. So you come out to have them flatter you and buy you drinks. You don’t want to get into any deep discussions. But you don’t mind a little deep passion.”

“You’re not calling me a whore.”

“Not at all. But you throw yourself in the moment. And you let yourself get spun around by whatever is happening. Some guy comes on to you. You think that he’s cute. Next thing you’re kissing him. You’re ready to hook up.”

“I’m not necessarily going to sleep with him.”

“I’m not saying that you are. This is more like a thought experiment.”

“Whatever.”

“And you do like to have sex.”

She gives Roger the look.

“Sometimes you use sex to make you feel that you’ve got things together. That you’ve figured it all out.”

“That’s way too much to assume.”

“You tell me, Jennifer.”

“Whatever happens, I’m not going to sleep with you.”

“That’s not what this is about.”

Patrick has been listening. He again perks up, “What’s wrong with Roger? He’s an upstanding guy.”

“I admit that I was attracted to him. I just didn’t know that he was such a freak.”

“What makes him a freak?”

“He asks all these questions as if there is something wrong. I don’t want to deal with that shit.”

“But you’d be willing to go home with him if he had never said this stuff.”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“Maybe could be yes.”

“I usually don’t go home with guys that I meet at bars. But if he called me, and he was my type, I wouldn’t mind hooking up.”

“Your type would be someone who never asked these questions.”

“I don’t need someone doing the freak on me.”

“But he’s just trying to find out who you are.”

“I don’t know who I am. Sure I know myself. Even the self that I might hide from the world. But there is this side of me that changes all the time. I need my freedom. Not someone following me around asking me questions.”

“Don’t you do that when get dressed. You’re always criticizing how you look. You’re checking out how guys are looking at you. You’re asking your friends if you look OK.”

“But that’s where I want it to stop. I don’t want to make a big rigamarole about it.”

Roger joins in again, “That’s where we come in. We just want to know.”

“Who are you guys? Are you member of some kind of cult.”

“I just take psychology classes. We look at this kind of stuff all the time.”

“But it’s class stuff. That’s why I never liked school that much. I don’t like to ask to many questions. It makes me uncomfortable. You’re young. You got to live. If you’re kissing a guy, you can’t keep asking him if you’re kissing right. You just have to do it.”

Roger wonders, “What about your future?”

“I’ve got a job. Maybe I’ll buy a house. I’ve got car payments. That’s my future. I might meet a nice guy. We could have kids. But I don’t want to burden myself with too many

questions. It just slows me down.”

“Wow!

“I hope that answers all your questions. Thanks for talking to me but I really should get back to my friends.”

She walks off.

“Roger, she’s nice. Go talk to her.”

“I did all my talking. She didn’t really want to hear it.”

“You could have been talking too abstractly for her. Go up to her, and turn on the Roger charm.”

“Why? I’ve got to know her pretty good. And she doesn’t like to think about this stuff.”

“She’s just like you used to be.”

“I was never like that. If I was, I can’t go back.”

“It could be contagious. She could go back to her friends and start to ask them some of the same questions.”

“She’s going to tell her friends that we’re a couple of weirdos.”

“Are we?”

“No, we’re just learning who we are.”

“That sounds too philosophical for a Friday night.”

A couple of days later, Patrick wakes up to a girl in his apartment.

“What are you doing here?”

“Me! What are you doing here?”

“I live here.”

At that moment, Roger walks out of his room.

“What is Marika doing in the apartment.”

“Marika? She told me that her name was Emerald.”

“It is Emerald.”

“What the fuck? A few days ago some guy wanted to kill me over you. Who are you? Where the hell are you from?”

“I met her at a club.”

“My name is Emerald.”

“And you lied to me.”

“I played a little game on you. But it seemed innocent at the time.”

“Did you sleep with Marika?”

Roger is looking dumb-founded, “Emerald and I just talked most of the night.”

“Talked about what. About how she fooled me.”

“I didn’t know that you lived here.”

“This is my apartment. And Senor Roger stays here by my good graces.”

“I never told her that this was my place.”

“I’m glad that you didn’t. But what did you tell her.”

“How did you become Marika?”

“I was in the grocery store. And you looked so bewildered. I wondered what it would be like to be lost in a supermarket. So I thought that I’d pretend to be from another country. I had seen these ads about mail order brides from the Ukraine. I figured that I’d just play along.”

“But you made me come back to the store a second time. And you still didn’t tell me anything.”

“I couldn’t. I had such a great time at first. I knew that I couldn’t have you come over to my place. You’d figure it all out. So I just like playing the part of Marika.”

“It spiraled out of control.”

“I was breaking up with this guy. And I inadvertently told him what I had done.”

“You had me meet you at that restaurant. What were you thinking?”

“I don’t know. I wanted to see you. I was afraid to come out and tell you everything that I did.”

“You kept stringing me along. Do you know that I almost ordered one of those brides? But you seemed even more perfect than anything that I could have ordered. I kept on trying to figure out why you were the way that you were. Did someone put you up to this? Roger were you behind this?”

“I was here when you got the phone calls.”

“You gave her the idea of the Ukrainian bride.”

Roger shook his head.

“Emerald, are you some kind of psycho?”

“No!”

“So why do you do this kind of thing to guys.”

“I’ve never done it before.”

“Great! You’re admitting your crime. You should be in jail.”

Roger defends her, “You don’t really think that. I just thought that the mail order bride thing was getting out of control. You needed to learn a lesson.”

“You put her up to this.”

“No way!”