

SHE LOOKED DOWN INTO THE moving water. The current was swift, but from her height on the bridge, its power looked insignificant. Nothing more than the leisurely flow of a lazy river park ride. The water had been warm on that day, but it was January now. No ice had formed in the river—it hadn't iced up for years—but the day was still cold, the air damp with mist. Her jacket wasn't much more than a windbreaker, and the blustery evening air cut right through. She was beyond shivering. Her mind blanked out the chill and she surrendered to the weather. Being cold was just the way it was.

That river ride years ago, a time with friends on a muggy summer's day, drifted through her mind. She had been so self-conscious about her body then, and had worn shorts rather than a bathing suit so as to cover her dimpled thighs. But with beers in her belly and a float in an inner tube down the river with her friends, jokes came easy, silly ones leading to laughs so hard that tears ran down her cheeks and she had trouble catching her breath. They'd eaten Mexican food at a touristy cantina overlooking the water park that afternoon, nachos and huevos and chorizo and cerveza. It probably didn't do any good for the dimples in her thighs, but that was okay. The day was bliss.

She had just broken up with her boyfriend, Sampson, the week before the ride. Why he was named Sampson, only his parents knew. She wasn't his Delilah, that was clear. The hurt of his insults and the way she picked at him in return didn't seem to matter as much as the loneliness she felt when they were together and not actually arguing about one thing or another. There had been a final fight—she couldn't quite remember what it had been about, something to do with the laundry—and he'd stormed out. The vacuum of his absence overwhelmed her at first, until she realized that she didn't really miss him all that much. But the nerves were still raw, her pride and self-respect wounded, on that summer's day at the water park. It was the first day she had felt good in a long, long time.

That whole summer had turned into a delight. Her group of friends, who had known each other since grade school, enjoyed the company of one another. The water park adventure had been followed by nights out on the town, dancing, drinking, catching live music. Sometimes she'd wondered how they'd all become friends. It didn't seem like they had that much in common,

other than a love of doing things together. Their personalities didn't particularly mesh. It seemed to her sometimes that they were friends just because they had always been friends. Was that good or bad?

That summer had been five years ago.

Here she was, on the precipice of more than just the bridge. She needed to do something. She didn't really want to jump, although she had to admit, the thought permeated her mind more than she'd liked. The water looked pretty cold, actually. The thought of her body hitting the water with a painful wallop turned her away from the railing.

A sustained gust made her tug her damp jacket around her more tightly. She pulled her arms out of the sleeves and hugged them to her body, their cold flesh warming on her torso. She briskly strode over the rest of the bridge, coat zipped, sleeves flapping in the wind.

The walk left her a little dizzy and lightheaded, and her feet led her to a tavern, warm and toasty. A rummage through her pockets revealed enough for one beer, and a meager tip. She wished for more, to be able to behave like a normal person and leave an everyday, or even generous, tip if she felt like it. She indulged herself with a beer anyway, warming up in the noisy hall. She sipped while her coat began to dry. It was now draped around her shoulders, the sleeves loosely knotted at her neck. The hope was she might look somewhat stylish rather than just pathetically trying to warm up and dry out her coat, trying to stay as long as her pocket change would grant her permission. She didn't want anyone there to see how close she was to the edge. She just wanted to look—to BE—normal.

This thought must have shown on her face, as the man sitting next to her at the bar said, "Let me get you another one of those."

She'd been so lost in her thoughts that she hadn't noticed him at all. Strange, because he was the sort of man she would. "Oh, no, no—" she said, protesting.

He grinned, revealing a set of perfect teeth, and said, "No, here, it's on me."

His smile dissipated as he looked more closely at her face. "And let's get a basket of chicken fingers and onion rings, while we're at it."

She tried to protest, but the words caught in her throat.

"Can I get a bowl of soup?" she heard herself say, the sounds surprising her own ears. Did she really say that? She'd meant to say no. But chicken fingers and onion rings and soup were now on the horizon. Would they serve some crackers? Oh, and then there was the beer.

He laughed, his easy style returning. With a flourish, he raised a finger.

"Garcon!"

Talking came easily with this stranger, as if her conversation was lubricated by the greasy onion rings and foamy beer. Somewhere in her mind she wondered just what he was after, as

he didn't seem to be trying to pick her up—certainly not in any usual way. And somewhere along the line she gave up figuring it all out. She ate, and drank, and got warm.

Thomas was his name. He'd lived around there all his life. He liked the bar; it was his favorite watering hole on his way home from work.

"And you?" he asked. Her face shut down. He glanced away. "Sorry I asked."

"Is it that obvious?"

"Um, yeah."

"Sorry," she replied, not knowing what else to say.

"Okay, we won't talk about it. But what's your name? You do have a name, don't you?"

"Lydia," she said. What? Her name was Margaret, Marty for short. She'd never lied about her name before. At least, not that she could remember. Right then, she wasn't remembering much of anything. Nor did she want to try.

"Lydia," he said slowly, trying it on for size. "Lydia," he said, in a more normal fashion. She tried to pretend the word sounded natural and familiar to her.

It had always been a favorite name for herself—old fashioned, uncommon, overlooked in a world of more contemporary names like Chelsea and Tyler. It had always suited her, she thought. But thinking about it was a far cry from blurting it out to a stranger. However, the evening had been full of fantasies so far. The illusion that she had enough to eat, enough to pay for a beer, that she had chores and obligations and bills and a life that continued on schedule, as Thomas (not Tom or Tommy) did. The dream seemed real enough, right then.

The TV on the wall switched to the news. It brought her back to earth in an instant; she felt cold again, dizzy again. The volume wasn't up, and no one could have heard it over the dull roar of liquor-assisted conversations. Closed captioning was on instead. She didn't want to watch, but her gaze was drawn to the screen.

Thomas saw her eyes flickering towards the TV as he was talking.

"Is it that bad?"

"What?"

"My conversation."

"No, no. Sorry." How many times had she apologized to him that evening already? It seemed she'd forgotten how to behave around a man.

"Can we go somewhere else?" she asked.

"I thought you'd never ask."

She fumbled for words. "I didn't mean—that's not what—"

"Ohhhhh," he said with a knowing nod and nonchalant smile.

She wasn't sure if he was insulted or just teasing her. He was very good looking, with brown hair, brown eyes, and what appeared to be well-groomed intentional stubble. He was a walking definition of tall, dark and handsome. She knew in her head that she could be quite pretty when she put a little effort into it, but in her current state, she hardly looked to be a woman on the prowl for a one night stand.

"But, but can we go somewhere?" she asked again. The news broke for commercials.

"Sure," he said. "Where?"

She put on her now-dry jacket and hurried towards the door.

"Someplace else."

He threw some bills on the bar, put on his coat, and swung his muffler around his neck.

Dusk had worn into night by this time. The drizzle, still cold, seemed softer now. Maybe it was the blanket of clouds holding in the warmth of the earth. Maybe it was the dry coat and the full stomach. Maybe something more. She felt a long-forgotten, unfamiliar giddy peace. They started walking down the street. She felt like holding hands with Thomas, swinging their arms like children.

"Where do you want to go?" Thomas asked.

"The moon!" she laughed in the mist.

Under the street lamp, the fine droplets swirled in the thick air. They clung to Thomas's black wool coat and gray muffler, clumping into droplets. They fell into his hair, glinting in the street light. Marty wondered if her own hair was turning into a frizzy pouf on her head. He smiled at her, and took her hand.

They walked a block to a levee nearby, and stood above the river. Across the water, the city's skyscrapers disappeared into the fog and mist. Lights from the cars, from the buildings, and from the city itself danced on the waves. There seemed to be no sound at all, save the muffled whirl of cars traveling over the bridge.

They stood. The deepening chill penetrated her jacket, and she shivered.

"You cold?" he asked.

She nodded.

He took his muffler from around his neck and wrapped it around hers. He kissed her. She kissed back. He put his arm around her shoulders, tucking her into the warmth of his body. They walked side by side, his arm slung over her shoulders, as if they'd done it always.