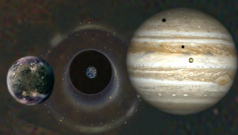


A NOVELLA

BURNISHED BRIDGE



Ray Melnik

Prologue – Burnished Bridge

No matter how successful we are in life, any satisfaction gained from all our achievements is diminished without someone with whom to share them. Life becomes nothing more than an exercise void of color. Love is the greatest gift the cosmos gives us and makes living this life worthwhile. Still, some will never know the feeling, either by choice or by circumstance. Real love starts with attraction that then develops into a deep friendship and respect for one another. In this one life we have to live, nothing can ever be as moving or as strong. I don't believe in fate, so there's really no guarantee that I or anyone else will ever find the one, but I won't stop trying. As Carl Sagan said, "For small creatures such as we the vastness is bearable only through love."

In *Burnished Bridge*, Alex Dael is successful beyond his wildest expectations, but he still feels empty inside. When he reaches the pinnacle of his scientific career, he realizes that it's the search and not the outcome that fuels him. He had been able to hide behind his desire for discovery, but now without it, he clearly sees the hole in himself. Then life plays the cruelest trick of all on him. He meets a woman, who stirs everything inside him, but she's far too young for him and she's with someone else. What's worse is that the man she's with treats her badly. Alex never experienced feelings this deeply before. He's driven by his heart and not his head. His desire to see her turns quickly into hurt. Rather than face the constant reminder of a career that has peaked and the love he cannot have, he decides to walk away from it all.

Alex believes it is because of us, the cosmos comes to know itself. This time it returns the favor.

Burnished Bridge is set in the same towns as my two previous novels, *The Room*, published in 2007, and *To Your Own Self Be True*, published in 2009. The story stands alone, but those who have read my novels will recognize cameo appearances of a few of the previous characters.

The Room

Publisher – iUniverse Inc. 2007

ISBN-10: 0595470297

ISBN-13: 978-0595470297

To Your Own Self Be True

Publisher – iUniverse Inc. 2009

ISBN-10: 1440128588

ISBN-13: 978-1440128585

For additional information, visit: www.emergentnovels.com

Burnished Bridge

I feel numb, I accept that I'm awake, but my vision is distorted and I can't hear. Where am I? What am I doing on the floor? What is that shape moving my way? My name is Alex. I know my name is Alex. It's getting closer. I feel it wrapping around me. The numbness is beginning to fade and I can feel someone's arms. My vision is still unclear, but I hear something.

"Alex."

Monday June 21st 2010

My alarm radio went off to the Ingrid Michaelson song, "Maybe," and I reluctantly crawled out of bed. Normally, on my way to the bathroom, I would shut the alarm off, but instead I just lowered the volume a bit. Five hours of sleep is usually enough for me, but I woke so many times during the night that I wasn't paying attention to what I was doing and cut myself shaving. I stripped off my night pants and underwear, turned on the shower faucet and, while waiting the few moments for the temperature to stabilize, I weighed myself. I stepped into the water and let it run over my head and I glanced down to see the blood from my cheek mixing into the water as it spun and poured down the drain. I could feel the sting, when the water hit the spot, but once I avoided a direct hit to my face, the softened water felt calming. When I finished, I dried off and hung the towel on the bar, but seeing blood spots, I threw it on the floor.

I hadn't experienced even one day of nervousness during the last seven years working on Project Glint, until now as we begin the trials. I can remember the moment I stumbled on the equation that proved the possibility. It was as beautiful as any equation I have ever seen. Barely a month after I published, the Department of

Defense visited and declared my work to be a matter of national security. I knew they were right, given the potential. Dr. Greene quickly jumped in and seized the opportunity to secure open ended funding for my research with the goal of putting the theories to practical use and providing a generous salary for me. I made a lot of progress during the first three years, but the key mechanism needed to bring it all to fruition remained elusive, until I took on the assistance of Elina.

Dr. Elina Maina's expertise in magnetic shields was critical. Thirty-two years old, twelve years my junior, I admire how far she had come for what is considered a young age for her field. Elina has an inner spark of excitement in her work. She's tall with long light brown hair and because of her youthful appearance, she often doesn't get the respect she deserves. Boy, are our colleagues in for a surprise.

I envy Elina in that she is able to stay fully engaged in work and still make time for her husband, Truman, and their daughters, Tasha and Nadia. Tasha was one year old when Elina joined the project and Nadia was born two years ago. I was honored when they asked me to be her Godfather. Truman, Elina and I have become really good friends. Elina's contributions to the project are priceless, but I also couldn't have a more pleasant work partner.

I finished dressing and, while making coffee, I opened the cabinet to insert the Michaelson CD, so I could listen again to the song that woke me, kept it low and switched the sound to the speakers outside to listen as I drank my coffee on the deck in back. My house is at the top of a small hill above Beaver Dam Lake in Salisbury Mills; the dam itself is just to the right. The water was almost motionless this morning; barely a breeze touched the trees. The back trees mirrored on the lake and were beginning to drop spring

seeds that speckled the reflection. No photograph could ever capture the real essence of such a convergence of calm and beauty. By this stage in my life I hoped to have someone to share it all with me, but Amelia just wasn't the right choice for my wife. I never stopped feeling that something was missing, until I realized it was the love. It wasn't much more than a year after I got the position at SciLab and we moved to Orange County that she decided she wasn't happy with a rural life. Because I grew up on Manhattan's upper west side, I gladly accepted the change; in fact, I desired it. Since my parents passed away, there was nothing really to keep me there. My profession could have taken me anywhere, but at least we were close enough to visit friends in the city and Amelia's family and friends on Staten Island. But it wasn't good enough for her. I kept the condo that my parents left to me; so, during the settlement I gave her what she wanted when I signed it over to her. For Amelia, to live on the upper west side of Manhattan was to live on top of the world. Neither one of us has called the other since then.

There was still time before I had to leave, so I poured a second cup of coffee and went to my desk to pay some accounts online. I automate every payment I can. Maybe it's a part of my geekness, but to me it just makes sense to optimize my time. Bills really irritate me, when they require intervention, but that's starting to change with some companies beginning to offer automatic withdrawal from my account. Once my town began to pull quarterly and yearly taxes, it left only a few utilities to get onboard. A macro I wrote flags any abnormalities and e-mails alerts to me. With the secured dividends that continuously accumulate in my account; I envision the day when I will never need to look at another bill. I took a peek at my retirement funds and SciLab stock, which looked to be doing fairly well, since coming out of the recession. Finally, I checked messages only to unleash a flooding of

spam. Oh, look; my ship has come in. I've been offered another fifty million dollars by a Nigerian prince. Now if I could only find a decent spam filter. I hit the delete key repeatedly until my inbox was empty, then it was time to go. There was no need for even a light jacket on such a beautiful June morning, so I slipped out, locking the door behind me.

I stopped at the light to make a left onto Route 208 and saw Brice in front of his tavern scraping the paint flakes off the front door frame. His place always looks well maintained. It has an Old English décor with a large shelf high on the wall behind the bar filled with the countless oddly shaped bottles he loves to collect. It has become my place of choice. So many times I passed that tavern and never thought it would be a good place for lunch. In the past I had lunch in a few places in Monroe, and once or twice a year at Newburgh Marina, but one day a couple of months ago I overheard someone talk about Brooks being a well kept secret, so I went for lunch. I've been going there every day since. I opened the passenger window to say good morning and that I would see him for lunch as usual. He heard me and looked just as the light turned green. He sported the classic Brice smile at a time of day that most people are just trying to wake up.

As I drove along the familiar road to SciLab, I reflected that since my divorce I'm finally getting used to being alone, but the feeling of loneliness comes in waves. I've tried a few attempts at dating, give up and then bury myself in work only to try again. I refuse to give up my contention that there is someone out there for me. No matter how much success I achieve, to live without love is to live in true poverty. But for now, I bury myself in work again. I bury myself in a secret of how beautiful the world really is, with a universe so incalculably immense that no god I've heard of would be capable of creating such awe. All we know so far is that natural

continuous evolution is evident in the brush strokes. Our existence is a chance for the cosmos to discover itself, but only if we open ourselves up to look. Most people choose to live behind a veil containing a tiny idea of the universe. They're unwilling or unable to see themselves as they truly are, or the cosmos for what it really is. But I want to see the realities. I want to take that one step further to add my tiny brush strokes through Glint. The math works. Tomorrow we begin putting it to the test.

BURNISHED BRIDGE

Alex Dael is on the brink of achieving the extraordinary. It's the scientific breakthrough of a thousand lifetimes, but inside he feels empty. Success is tempered when there is no one to share it with. He believes that to live without love is to live in true poverty. When Alex finally meets a woman who is everything he desires, she's out of reach. Rather than face the constant reminder and a career that has peaked, he chooses to take a wild ride. Alex believes that because of us, the cosmos comes to know itself. This time it returns the favor.

Author Ray Melnik has written novels, short stories, essays and lyrics. His first novel is called *The Room*, published in 2007. His second novel is *To Your Own Self Be True*, published in 2009.

Graphics: ntech media design

