

Megan's Bridge

She sat and watched her classmates from her spot on the swing set as they chased one another around the playground, laughing and yelling, cat-calling to one another amiably enough. It was mostly the boys who did this, possibly because it was a Friday and they were almost delirious with the prospect of the forthcoming weekend but mostly, Megan thought, because they were twelve and thirteen year old boys who were a raging mass of testosterone and felt it their duty to rank out as many mothers/sisters as they could.

“Hey Joe, who was that skank I saw your brother with at the Dairy Queen last night?”

“What, you didn't recognize your own sister?”

The eighth grade boys were the worst, she thought disgustedly. Always talking dirty and fighting. The only reason they were getting along so well today was because their teacher, Mrs. Vaughn, was out sick, and substitutes meant a free day. Subs never knew what to do with them; they were too difficult to control.

“They” were a small band of misfits, a group of sixth, seventh and eighth graders who had been labeled as “emotional problems” by the school guidance counselors. The Progressive School was in its fourth year with the breezily titled “Discoveries” program, which kept Megan and her classmates mostly separated from the other children during the week. It was as if, she thought now with a sneer, the school officials were afraid that their “emotional problems” were contagious and wanted to keep the normal kids from getting infected.

On Fridays the Discoveries group ate lunch with the other kids and shared one class, which happened to be Art, Megan's favorite.

She pushed off from the soft, sandy dirt beneath her and pumped her legs to make the swing move higher, closing her eyes as she felt the summer air magically grow cooler against her skin as it picked up with her movement. She was looking forward to Art today, especially since she had finished the charcoal piece she had started the week prior. She couldn't wait to show it to Mr. Ashby, the only teacher at Progressive who seemed to give a damn about her or her schoolwork. It didn't hurt that he was unfailingly cute, she thought with a little smile playing at her lips. Dark hair that fell over his left eye when he was really concentrating on his work; soft, liquid brown eyes that seemed to see into her soul. She would miss him when she moved on next year to high school. Her art skills had really taken a turn for the better under his tutelage, she reflected, especially over the past few weeks.

But this last piece, it was really a corker. And she couldn't let Mr. Ashby take all the credit for it, even though he had been good enough to inspire her on more than one occasion. A glance through her sketchbook would tell anyone who cared to look that he was her favorite teacher; he was the subject of ninety percent of the drawings inside.

Lately she'd had other inspirations, however. Dark things, things that went bump in the night and scratched at windows with sharp, unrelenting fingers. She had even had nightmares a few times, but dreams came and went and so she pushed the fear away, to the back of her mind, and went with whatever her thoughts threw at her.

She had bought a new sketchbook for those inspirations, though. It wouldn't do

for just anyone to see what she had been pulling out of thin air.

“Hey, Megan!”

She jerked as though out of a trance and turned to see Bryce Ellington, the biggest meathead jock in the school, standing behind her with two of his football playing lackeys.

“I heard you were a witch. Why don't you cast a spell to make them titties pop out of that dress?”

She watched as he and his buddies nearly collapsed with the force of his wit, her eyes narrowed to small dark slits. Several of her classmates had taken to calling her “witch” and “goth girl” lately because of a newfound fondness for the color black. She had even dyed her hair to match her clothes, a particularly violent shade that had undertones of blue running through it. It made her naturally fair skin appear to be even more pale but she liked the way it shone in the sun, like the underside of a crow's wing, like something pretty.

And now these assholes were ruining her good thoughts and her peace by making fun of her. She smiled sweetly at the boys and said the first thing that came to mind, something she had taken to doing since discovering her new talent. Fear didn't cloud her mind for once. It was nice.

“Maybe I can cast a spell to make your dick bigger. My grandma said she can hardly feel it.”

There was a moment of absolute silence before the other boys burst out laughing, doubling over with the force of it. The sound was harsh and jangling even among the voices of the other kids on the playground, and some of them stopped what they were doing to crane their necks and see what was going on.

“What did you say to me, bitch?” Bryce asked softly, unbelievably. His fists curled into themselves at his side. Megan still did not feel threatened.

“You heard me.”

Distantly she could hear someone ask one of the lackeys what had happened and him replaying the conversation thus far. Cruel laughter drifted over to her, past Bryce, who was working up a pretty good head of steam judging by the blush rising from his collar. His pride had been wounded, and worse than that, it had been wounded by a *girl*. She could almost feel the anger coming off him in waves. But she did not apologize. And she did not back down.

The bell rang, signaling the end of free time. Soon the kindergartners would be arriving in bright, noisy clusters, chaperoned by their pretty young teacher, Miss Able. The older kids began to break up, moving slowly back up to the school building in groups of twos and threes. Megan kept her eyes locked with Bryce, who was flaring his nostrils like a bull. It was a funny sight and she expected white plumes of steam to escape his ears at any moment, but she didn't dare laugh at him. That would be pushing her luck and she knew it.

“C'mon, man, let's go. We're gonna be late,” one of the lackeys said, tugging on Bryce's shirtsleeve.

“Yeah, you know what Mrs. Mcorvey said,” the other lackey said, already walking toward the school. “One more tardy and we get a three day suspension. I can't afford that shit, man. I'm already on probation with my old man.”

Bryce stood where he was, fists clenching and unclenching in a fit of rage. “This bitch--”

“Forget her, man, let's go!”

He seemed torn for a moment, looking back and forth between his friends and Megan, who was still smiling sweetly from her spot on the swing.

“I'll get you, slut,” he said finally. His voice seemed raw with the effort of holding back a scream and Megan glanced up at the school building, where the monitor was waiting for them with a glare in place on his sour, unforgiving face. “If it's the last thing I do, I'll get you.”

He walked slowly away, seeming to lurch along on stiff legs. He was so angry his entire body bore the brunt of it, Megan thought with amusement. There was something familiar about his gait. She tilted her head for a moment in the bright sunshine, trying to figure out what it was.

And then it hit her: he looked like her new friend.

The thought made her smile and she stood and stretched slowly in the heat of the day like a lazy cat before making her way back up to the school.

He would get her. Yeah. Right.

The creek that ran along Clay's Mill road babbled incessantly as Megan walked home, her constant companion. She switched her backpack from her left shoulder to her right and breathed in deep of the day. It smelled like honeysuckle and of the tiny purple blossoms that grew on the side of the road, more weed than actual flower.

Yet there was another smell mixed in, she thought as she neared the short wooden bridge that would take her to Brigg's Ferry. It was a dark and hungry scent that reminded her of the way old barns

smelled in the summer; like wild beasts and meat and fecal matter.

She knew what that smell meant. He was here. Her friend.

She walked to the bridge and bent to look over at the stream, hoping he was in a friendly mood today. The water ran clear and unfettered over rocks and sand, making a soft gurgling noise that almost masked the sound of footsteps behind her.

She turned slowly as the shadow crept up over hers and smiled.

“Hello, Bryce.”

“Don't hello me, bitch,” Bryce said softly. The gel in his hair gleamed dully in the sunshine, spiking the strands so that they looked like the teeth of a razor. “I told you I'd get you. And I keep my promises.”

Megan smiled even broader and unshouldered her backpack, dropping it to the wooden floor of the bridge with a heavy *thud*. “Oh, c'mon, Bryce. I was only kidding. You can dish it out but you can't take it?”

He stepped forward until they were nose to nose and his eyes were bottomless black pits only bare centimeters from hers. “Listen--”

“Wait,” she said softly. “I don't want to fight. I'm sorry.”

“It's too late for your fucking sorries.”

She tried to back away but the railing of the bridge was already at her hip and she only succeeded in digging it in even further. He followed, leaning in so close to her that she was actually partially bent over the bridge backwards.

“Look, Bryce, I want to make a peace offering. I'll let you touch me.”

That stopped him in his tracks. It was what she had been hoping for, what she had placed all her chips on: that the simple fact that he was a warm blooded male would

get in the way of his anger for a moment.

“What do you mean? Is this some kind of trick?” He took a step back and looked at her with his brow furrowed in suspicion.

“No no, no trick,” she assured him. “Just think of it as an apology on my part.”

He looked around them like a thief about to jimmy the lock on a car door and cracked his knuckles. She watched his tongue snake out to wipe perspiration from his upper lip and thought how good it would be. How good *he* would be.

“Where?” he asked in a low voice.

She smiled and took his hand gently. It was a big hand for an eighth grade boy, rough and callused with farm work and from the endless days on the football field in weather both fair and foul.

“Anywhere you want,” she said, and he grunted. It was as close as she would get to a consent from him, she understood. He would never admit that the need was there, the want; especially since it was for her, the girl who was not only considered a freak among freaks but who had shamed him in front of his buddies.

He let her guide his hand to the front of her dress and then he took over, unbuttoning the bodice just enough so that her bra peeked out. It was white cotton, sensible for the summer heat. She felt a tremor go through him and he sighed at the feel of the material, his eyes never moving from those small buds sheathed in cotton, from the hint of promise. He was so engrossed in what was in front of him that he did not hear the thing behind him.

It was her friend, the one she had sketched a portrait of a week ago. He looked

just as she had drawn him on that day, huge and misshapen with a great mass of black hair that grew in a natural mohawk on top of his head and continued down his back. His hands had gotten so much stronger, she noticed, almost twice the size of how she'd drawn them. He must have been building up his strength while she was away at school. She felt a twinge of sorrow at having left him alone for so long, but the time had gotten away from her after that first drawing was finished and she hadn't been able to come visit the way she promised she would.

But she was hoping that her little gift would appease him.

Bryce saw the shadow fall over both of them before he heard the beast and turned slowly around as if in a dream. Perhaps he thought he was, Megan thought. He certainly would before it was over. Rather, he would *hope* it was a dream. A nightmare.

The beast reared its head back and let loose a primal scream toward the heavens in what Megan hoped was delight, balling up his fists before grabbing Bryce by the throat and picking him up effortlessly. The boy screamed thinly, as though he had asthma, or perhaps his windpipe had been crushed. Megan didn't know or care. She buttoned up her dress and re-shouldered her backpack as the beast placed Bryce carefully in its mouth the way a mama cat will do her kittens and moved back to his spot beneath the bridge. Long,ropy bands of muscle moved across his back and she wondered just how strong he had gotten during his time alone. He certainly didn't seem to have any trouble with his dinner, she thought, smiling down over the bridge at him. Bryce was still clamped in its mouth and he appeared to be breathing, but she couldn't tell for certain from this distance. At any rate, his eyes were glazed and dead. Blood spilled from the gashes in his side where the

beast's teeth had torn through the flesh. His throat had a bruised, thick look about it that reminded Megan of her brother's pet snake and the way his body bulged after eating a mouse.

“That's for you,” she said softly to her friend. “All for you. I'll bring you more when I can, okay?”

The beast looked up then with the boy dangling from his lips, his eyes seeming to glow in the dim light under the bridge, but whether out of happiness with her or annoyance, she couldn't tell.

She decided not to stick around to find out.

The next day at school the rumors flew. Bryce hadn't shown up for school, of course, and the kids were all gleaning their own explanations as to why: his father, who was a well known drunk in their small town, had beaten him for some infraction and finally gone too far and killed him. He had been too ashamed to show his face at school after what Megan had said on the playground. Megan really was a witch, after all, and had put a spell on him, rendering him unable to use his arms or legs and therefore unable to show up at school, ensuring his suspension.

Megan didn't care what they said. She took her sketchbook to the art room during free period, when she knew Mr. Ashby would be working on his latest project. He had been working with clay lately and she found him sitting at the potter's wheel, staring intently at the blob of reddish mud slung out before him.

“Mr. Ashby?”

He turned to her with a smile and she couldn't help but reciprocate. It was contagious, that smile. And it gave her the courage to show him what she had brought with her.

“Hello, Megan. Why aren't you out with the others, enjoying the day?”

She stepped forward and handed him the sketchbook almost reverently, as though making an offering of some kind. And, in a way, she thought, she was. He was the one person who understood her, the one person who would get her drawings and see them for what they were. Together they could create anything they wanted, a world of their own in which The Progressive School and people like Bryce Ellington didn't exist.

He took the book from her without a word and flipped it open to the first drawing. The beast seemed to leap from the page, grotesque red eyes bulging, Mohawk razor straight and sharp like the quills of a porcupine. The muscles in its forearms bunched and knotted together like thin snakes, a mass of tendon and flesh that looked made for tearing and destroying. It stood just under the bridge in the drawing, rendered here in charcoal and broad strokes from an ebony pencil.

He was ugly, she thought, looking at her creation over Mr. Ashby's shoulder. But he was hers.

“Megan,” Mr. Ashby began. She looked at him hopefully, sure that what he was about to say would change their lives forever.

“This is a departure for you, isn't it? I didn't think you cared much for this fairy tale stuff.”

Megan's smile faltered. To watch it was much like watching a cloud pass over the

sun. His expression was not what she'd imagined. He didn't look impressed or happy for her at all. In fact, he looked rather sick to his stomach. He held the sketchbook by his thumb and forefinger as though he didn't want to touch it any more than he had to.

Suddenly Megan smiled again. It was a bright, brilliant smile that Mr. Ashby found contagious despite his reservations against the drawing, and he returned it with fervor.

“I'm sorry you don't like it,” Megan said, still smiling. “But maybe you could walk me home today and I can show you the bridge from the sketch. It was very inspiring.”

There were strict school policies against fraternizing with students outside of school grounds, but Mr. Ashby agreed reluctantly. It would be wrong to deny such a small request, especially coming from Megan, who showed such promise as an artist. He couldn't put his finger on it, but she had something. Some unexplainable glimmer behind those big, dark eyes.

Besides, what harm could it do?