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The Bridge by Moonlight

ELVA PEART SITS ON THE porch of her cottage in Augustine Cove, watching the fading bloom of sunset behind the Confederation Bridge. Her grandson kneels at the edge of the lawn and plays with his truck on the gravel road, which winds past the other cottages, leading to the main paved road.

“Rennie, it’s past time you were in bed.”

He keeps his eyes fixed on his truck, moving it back and forth over a small rut he’s dug in the gravel. “I want to be up when my mum gets here.”

Elva’s daughter-in-law was supposed to have arrived an hour ago. Her cell phone was off. What was the point in having a cell phone if you were going to leave it turned off? One of those pay as you go plans. Elva knew Trace was watching her money and didn’t want to use up the time on the phone. Emergencies only. Still you’d think she’d call to let a body know she’s running late, that she’s okay.

It’s barely a year since Elva’s son died. Cut off by a drunk driver on the double highway through Edmunston while hauling potatoes to Quebec City. Rennie had just turned three. Trace scarcely makes ends meet with what’s left of the insurance cheque.

Elva likes it at night when the lights along the bridge turn on. She remembers when they were still building the bridge, how it was going to connect the island to the rest of the world. It’ll be faster than the ferry, they said. Better for trade and tourism. A new era of prosperity.

Elva can’t see the cars from here. For all she knows Trace might be driving across the bridge at this very moment.

“Come on, Rennie. It’s too dark for you to be out now.”

“But I don’t want to miss my mum.”

"If you want to stay up you have to sit on the porch here with me."

The boy gets up, leaving his truck in the gravel rut. He stretches his short legs to climb the wooden steps, then pulls himself up onto Elva's lap. She rocks the two of them on the little porch swing.

"How come my mum has to keep going to Moncton?"

"She's doing some work there."

"With that man?"

"Yeah," she says, shadowing the word with a drawn breath.

"He's a friggin' poo-head."

"You know I don't like that language."

"He yelled at me once. When I dripped ice cream on his car seat."

Elva kisses the fine tangle on top of her grandson's head. Rennie yawns and presses his cheek against the crook of her cradling arm. Under the shimmering new moon the bridge is nothing but a spine of stars linking to an invisible mainland.

The phone rings and her first instinct is to let the machine take it. The boy's getting all comfy, why disturb him. But it could be Trace. A cold flicker starts something coiling inside her. Remembering the phone call from the police telling her about Stevie's accident.

Rennie is sliding off her lap now. "I want to answer it."

"You stay here on the swing."

"If it's my mum I want to talk to her."

The screen door slams behind her as she strides down the hall. She manages to get it just before the third ring, beating the machine. It's Trace. Right away Elva can tell she's not calling from her cell phone.

"Where are you?"

"Still in Moncton." Her speech is slightly slurred. But there's something else in her voice. Something percolating between the words.

"Have you been drinking?"

"Just a couple glasses of champagne."

"Why, is it New Year's Eve over there?"

"Don't be cross now. And as a matter of fact we are celebratin' somethin'. But it's a surprise. I'll tell yez tomorrow."

Elva listens for the squeak of the porch swing outside.

"Rennie's been waiting up for you." She tries to keep her voice hushed. "Poor mite."

The sudden clatter of the screen door makes Elva almost drop the phone. Rennie comes running part way across the hall and practically slides the rest of the way on the Indian throw rug like it's some kind of flying carpet. It was a birthday present from Stevie. He'd bought it at a roadside shop on the way back from one of his hauls.

"Lemme talk to my mum!"

"You put that rug back properly first," snaps Elva, perhaps somewhat more harshly than she intended. She doesn't like the idea of letting the boy talk to Trace when she's in this condition. Not that she gets that way often, but Elva knows well enough it's not all business when Trace is in Moncton. Elva's mind is a blank as she tries to think of an excuse not to let the boy have the phone. But he has straightened the rug and is now pulling on the coiled telephone cord.

"What did I say about grabbing?" She reluctantly gives up the receiver to his little hands.

She's only half listening to the usual one-sided conversation. Rennie wanting to know when his mum's getting back and why does she have to keep going away. The automatic responses pop in Elva's head, but her mind is mostly thinking about what Trace said about a surprise. Elva didn't like the sound of that. It had all the earmarks of Trace going ahead and doing something foolish. Like taking that part-time job in Moncton. Driving out there every other week to do the books for that real estate salesman. Staying in some apartment he rents for her. What did Trace say his name was? Davis. Separated from his wife in a pig's eye. Foolish girl. With her skills she could have easily found a job on the island. Even her nephew Kyle got into the GST in Summerside after passing the test on the third try.

Elva notices a top corner of the screen on the outer front door has come loose, curling over to reveal a perfect triangle of black in contrast to the grey wire mesh.

"My mum wants to talk to you." Rennie holds up the receiver like a tiny weightlifter hefting a small barbell. Elva takes it from him.

"What's this surprise you're going to spring on us? I'm sure I've had enough surprises to last me my life."

"Like I said, I'll tell yez tomorrow. I already told Rennie that that's when he's gonna find out."

"Well that should keep him up all night, thanks very much."

"I want to tell yez together in person." She lets out a throaty giggle and tells someone on her end to cut it out.

Elva looks down at Rennie, then quickly looks away. It's on the tip of her tongue to tell Trace to grow up. "And what time can we expect you tomorrow?"

"I'll probably leave here around noon. So I should be there probably by two."

Famous last words Elva thinks as she hangs up the phone, then regrets thinking it. She goes over to the door and tries to push the drooping corner of the screen back in place, but it just curls over again.

It's too late to give Rennie a bath so she just gets him into his Spiderman pee-jays and puts on her nightie. He wants to sleep in her bed. She doesn't want to make a habit of it but she relents. It's supposed to be a grandmother's privilege to spoil her grandchild, but Elva feels the responsibility to give the boy some discipline, what with his mother being away so much. She doesn't want to call Trace a bad mother, but sometimes she should know better.

"My mum is bringing me back a surprise. She said so. I think it's going to be a new truck. D'yah think so?"

"No point worrying about that now. If you're going to stay in this bed you have to go to sleep. Now."

He rolls on his side and nuzzles his back against her side. Just like Stevie used to when he was that age. In a few minutes his steady breathing fills the darkness, like the slow hiss of a radiator. Reassuring in a strange way. It is she who lies awake, staring out the window at the lights on the bridge.

Trace holds out her hand with her wrist slightly limp, the better to display the ring on her finger. It is a slender band made of white gold with a diamond chip embedded in the middle. Elva eyes it suspiciously, although a part of her is impressed. The clankety-whirr of the bent blade on the electric fan's metal grate seems to be mimicking her mental process, so many things running through her mind. The two of them are sitting at the kitchen

table with tall glasses of iced tea. Rennie is on the porch playing with the racing car Trace has bought him.

"He took me out for supper and gave me the ring before the dessert came. It was in a beautiful velvet box. Who could eat after that anyway?"

"And he actually proposed right there in the restaurant?" asks Elva, trying to get the facts straight in her head.

"His divorce came through last week. I didn't even know. He was keeping it as a surprise."

"Doesn't waste time, does he. You'd think a man would want some breathing space after the end of a marriage."

"Davis isn't like that," says Trace, narrowing her eyes. Her knowing smirk embarrasses Elva. "He loves being married. It's his wife who divorced him. His ex-wife I mean. She only married him for his money anyway. She never cared about making him happy."

Their conversation is interrupted by the slamming screen door and the heavy stomping of small bare feet on the hallway's wooden floor.

"What have I said about running inside?" Elva calls out.

"You listen to your Nana now," Trace adds.

Rennie stops just before entering the kitchen. His two small hands grasp onto the entranceway frame with feet firmly planted in the bottom corner of the frame, dirty toes scrunched upward. He swings back and forth like a rickety gate with his head stretched back, trying to catch the breeze off the electric fan.

"How come you're not outside playing with your new car?" Elva asks.

"I want a drink."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I want a drink." he says. "*Pleeeeeeze.*" He stretches his head back farther so that the word barely squeezes out of his little throat.

"You're going to fall some hard if you keep doing that," says Trace. "Come sit on your mum's lap and have a drink. I want to show you something."

Elva pushes her chair back and Trace looks at her. "Don't go," she says.

"Do you think now's a good time?" Elva asks. "Maybe...."

But Trace only nods to say it'll be alright. Rennie scampers onto his mother's lap. Elva reaches for his juice cup on the counter and pours some iced tea into it. She finds she has to hold the

plastic thermal pitcher with both hands to keep it steady. She screws on the juice cup's spouted top and hands it to Rennie.

"What do you say to Nana?"

"Thank you," he says and pops the spout into his mouth, sucking hard like a baby with his bottle.

Elva watches as Trace waits for Rennie to finish drinking. She feels somehow as if she's not in the room, like she's looking in on them. Checking to see if mother and son are getting on alright. Always at the ready to rush in just in case there's a problem of some kind. Making herself into a bridge between them. Now that Stevie's gone. Like it was yesterday. Rennie on Trace's lap. *Daddy's not coming back from this trip. He drove his truck straight up to Heaven.*

Rennie stops drinking but holds onto his cup with both hands. Trace holds up the ring. "See? Mumma got a present too. It's some pretty, isn't it."

"Where'd you get it?"

"Davis gave it to me. You remember Davis? The man I work for in Moncton? Remember that one time he took us for a drive in that big car of his?"

Rennie nods, staring at his juice cup.

"Didn't you tell me he bought you an ice cream cone?" Elva says. Rennie looks at her. She smiles back, trying to reassure him, feeling utterly helpless.

"I don't want you to go to Moncton again," Rennie says, and sticks the spout back in his mouth.

"I got to go next weekend. I got a job to go to. But I tell you what. This time you can come with me to Moncton. Davis has a nice big apartment there. That's where we'd stay. Me and you. Would you like that?"

Rennie keeps sucking on the juice spout, then he puts the cup down and reaches his arms out to Elva. Her instinct is to pick him up off Trace, but she does nothing. Her hands are folded numbly on her lap. She feels like her arms have been cut off.

"Honey?" says Trace. "You didn't answer me. Would you like that? Me and you living in Moncton?"

Rennie shakes his head vigorously. Trace has her arms around his little belly and he starts to squirm, trying to wriggle off her lap, his arms still outstretched to his Nana.

"Lots of toy stores in Moncton," says Trace, not loosening her grip on him. He starts to whine. Elva shoots her daughter-in-law a look. Trace loosens her arms and Rennie hops down, goes over to Elva and drops his head in her lap.

"Why don't you go out and play with your car," Elva says, stroking his hair. It's getting long, but she can't bear the idea of cutting it, it's so soft and cool like a sudden breeze. She watches Trace circling the diamond chip on her ring with her little finger and can't help feeling bad for her.

Later that evening Elva gives Rennie a bath, gets him in his pee-jays and tucks him into his bed.

"I want to sleep in your bed again," he says.

"I let you last night. We're not making a habit of it."

"Then I want to sleep in my mum's bed."

"Not tonight," says Trace. She is standing by the doorway and steps into the room. "Let's show your Nana that you're a big enough boy to sleep in your own bed. Now give me a kiss good-night." She kneels by the bed and offers her cheek. He wraps his arms around her neck and smacks his lips loudly against her puckered mouth.

After Elva reads him a story and turns off the light she goes out to the porch where Trace is sitting on the steps smoking. Near her stands a suitcase and a smaller valise.

"What are you doing with those?" asks Elva.

Trace blows out smoke toward the bridge. She doesn't look at Elva. "I called Davis and told him we're coming tomorrow."

"What's the hurry? Rennie'll come around, but you need to give it some time."

"The sooner he gets used to it the better. He'll be okay once we're there."

Elva sits on her swing. Trace's clunky old Bonneville is parked on the gravel road. Elva notices Rennie's toy truck from where he left it yesterday. It's lying on its side practically under the Bonneville's front left tire.

"Not long after Alvin died I took Stevie on a trip to Halifax to see his Auntie Soph, Alvin's sister." Elva stares at the back of Trace's head and the trail of smoke that seems to be rising from it. Trace has probably heard this already, but Elva doesn't care. "Drove there

with Alvin's brother in his pick-up. There was no bridge then, of course. We had to take the Borden ferry over to Cape Tormentine. Stevie loved the ferry, loved looking out over the water. Soon as we got to the other side all he wanted was to ride back again."

Trace flicks away her cigarette butt and the red glow arcs into the night like a shooting star then disappears. "Don't you think I miss him too?" she says. She still won't turn around and Elva understands it's because she's crying. Then Trace gets up from the steps and carries the two suitcases to the car.

The bridge is lit up now. All the lights except one. Elva focuses on that dark space, a deeper absence intensified by the surrounding lights. She rocks on her swing, the metal hinges complaining softly. The moon plays hide-and-seek, weaving in and out of invisible clouds.