

I'll Meet You On The Bridge

Once upon a time, a woman lived in a house with a small garden, in the city she had been born in. And there was nothing very remarkable about it, until the city forgot who she was.

Before it happened, the woman used to walk – no more or less than anyone else. She walked empty plastic bags to the supermarket and returned with them full. She walked to bus stops and train stations, friends' houses and the gym. She didn't realise, until it happened, how every journey she made allowed her to know the place better. She didn't think too much about how the smallest of things could make her smile – the first blossoms in the park, the ivy on the school wall blushing with autumn, the patterns ice made on the grass.

The day it happened was the same as any other day – a sleep-clogged rush through the house, and then out into the starkness of morning sun. She greeted the bus driver, and when he frowned at her like he didn't understand, she shrugged and walked to the seat she always took, by the window on the left hand side. If she had paid attention, she would have seen that the street signs and the billboards and the posters inside the bus were in a language she didn't understand; but she had seen them so many times before, she just assumed they said what they had always said.

Every morning, the woman bought a cappuccino from a shop called *Alberto's*, next to her office. They knew her in there – made her drink without her having to ask. But this morning, when she came to pay, the man behind the counter looked at her coins, laughed, and said something she couldn't recognise. She waited. He looked at her expectantly. She could smell the hot milky coffee. If she had reached out her hand she could have touched the cup, felt the heat through the curved cardboard. The man wouldn't take her money. He kept talking, smiling at first, but she could see his irritation growing, and a queue had started to form behind her. She walked out of the shop, and into the tall building next door with its mirrored windows and pale brick façade .

She had worked long enough and hard enough to be given a small cubby-hole of an office, just off the thoroughfare between the Finance Department and the Marketing and Communications Team. She slipped inside and closed the door, told herself it was nothing at all, a couple of misunderstandings, no more than that. But she was paying attention now.

When she woke up her computer, the screen was full of words she couldn't read. She picked up her telephone and then put it down again. She opened her office door, stood pressed into the corner so that no-one would see her, and listened. There were plenty of

voices, but she didn't know what they were saying. She locked the door, sat at her computer with her eyes closed, and counted to ten. She opened them in the hope that the words on her screen would have shifted into sense; trying to catch the world by surprise; trying to pretend that none of it was happening.

Slowly, the woman's world fell away from her. The bus company refused to renew her travelcard, shook their heads at her money and shrugged their shoulders at her tears. Her boss called her into her office and sat with her arms folded, her eyebrows pressed into a frown, offering strings of sentences that the woman could make no sense of. When she walked, she couldn't understand the names of the streets, couldn't ask for the time, or for directions. She couldn't even buy a cup of coffee. Soon, just the idea of going outside left her breathless and scared. She stayed at home. She stopped answering the doorbell and the phone. She unplugged the television and threw away the radio. The man she loved gave up and moved on. Her friends stopped calling. She ate vegetables from her garden and tinned fruit from her cupboards. She looked at the sky sliced into rectangles by her window frames. Sometimes she lay on her bed and whispered into the pillows.

Weeks later, or maybe months – it is difficult to track time when you live between four walls with no-one to talk to – the doorbell did ring. The woman was standing in the hallway at the time, and the noise of it took her so by surprise, she opened the door without stopping to think. The man on the doorstep was as tall as the man she had loved. His eyes were the colour of summer leaves; his skin as smooth and warm as hazelnut flesh. She wanted to slam the door shut again, but she hadn't been brought up to be rude. She said, 'Hello, can I help you,' and waited for him to leave. Instead, he smiled and held out a piece of paper. It was beautiful: the colour of clotted cream, covered with black inked marks.

'I don't understand,' she said. 'I can't read it.'

He pushed the paper towards her.

'I don't know what it says,' she said; but she took it all the same. 'I could make you a cup of tea,' she said. He looked at her with his green eyes and didn't say anything. She mimed drinking a cup of tea and he smiled, and followed her inside.

When she took the tea through to the living room, he was sitting in the chair the man she had loved used to sit in; writing. Another piece of thick cream paper was spread over an old magazine of hers; his pen was dancing words across its surface.

'I can't read it,' she said, and suddenly she was angry and wanted him to leave.

He carried on writing. When he had finished he drank his tea. The two of them, sitting in silence in her living room. When he left, he handed the paper to her like it was something precious. She sat all evening, with the two pieces of paper on her lap, trying to know what they said.

She waited for him. He didn't come back the next day, or the day after. She carried the papers around the house. She stood by the window of her bedroom and looked out over the street she used to live in. The day after that, she cooked meze – dishes her grandmother had taught her, years ago. The house smelt of garlic and mint and fried onions. She caught herself singing as she sliced aubergines into fat wheels. He came that day; she knew he would.

It was raining. His hair was wet against his head and raindrops sat like crystals on the heavy grey folds of his coat. He stepped into the hallway and took another sheet of paper from his black bag with the long leather shoulder strap. They sat in the kitchen, listening to the rain. They ate. He wrote. She looked for patterns in the text, but couldn't find any.

The next time he came she taught him a dance she'd learnt from her mother. She put a record onto the player that hadn't been used for years, and they moved around the room. When the music stopped he took out his paper and pen and wrote a single word. He pointed at the word and then pointed at the woman. A name, then, she thought; a name I cannot say.

She lost count of how many times he came. The pile of paper on the coffee table grew. The woman woke in the mornings feeling somehow lighter.

The last time he came it was one of those perfect autumn days – crisp and cold, the whole world in sharp focus. Somehow she knew it was the last time, even before she had opened the door – a free fall sensation at the base of her chest. He stood on the doorstep and held out his hand. His face was as gentle as ever, but he wanted something and she didn't know what it was.

'Why don't you come in?' she said, but he shook his head and kept his hand held out towards her.

She waited, and eventually, she realised. She turned and walked into the house, picked up the pile of crisp paper, covered with his neat black handwriting, and brought it to him. She kept her lips pressed close together, so she wouldn't cry. He took the papers, but

instead of leaving, he lifted a large book with heavy red covers from his bag and fitted the pages inside. He handed the book to her.

'I have to go now,' he said. His voice was higher and softer than she had expected. For a moment she didn't realise that she could understand his words. 'I'll meet you on the bridge,' he said, and she knew right away which one he meant. It stretched across the river just half a mile from her house: a green metal bridge that looked like it might snap in two, though it had been standing for hundreds of years.

'What language are you speaking?' she asked, because suddenly she wasn't sure. 'And why didn't you –'

He shook his head and placed a finger against his lips, and then he turned and walked away and the woman was left, standing on her doorstep, knowing that if she turned around all she would see would be her empty hallway.

'I don't go out,' she said to his retreating figure. 'You have to understand that, I can't go out.'

The book was heavier than it looked. The woman opened it. On the first page was a single word: *Welcome*. She looked up, but the man had gone. She realised she didn't even know his name. She walked down her own front steps for the first time in weeks, or maybe months, or maybe years. She didn't close the front door. She didn't look back.

Half way down the street she saw a woman with a pushchair, bags of shopping hanging from the back.

'Do you have the time?' she asked, in the way of an experiment. The woman with the pushchair frowned. Nothing had changed. The woman holding the book felt her heart skip and her stomach sink, but instead of walking away she turned to the next page of the book. She held it out to the woman with the pushchair, who read it, and then smiled, nodded her head, and pulled up her sleeve to reveal her watch. It was just after half past eleven. The woman with the book felt a smile bubble up from her chest.

The woman carried on towards the bridge. She stopped at the newsagents, the one just after the bus stop, with the newspaper racks outside. The newspaper print meant nothing to her, but she went inside all the same. She chose a purple-wrapped chocolate bar. Her favourite. She hadn't tasted one for weeks, or maybe months, or maybe years. She took a coin from her pocket and offered it to the man behind the counter. She held her breath. He looked at the coin suspiciously. Nothing had changed. The woman holding the book felt her heart skip and her stomach sink, but instead of walking away she turned to the

next page of the book. She held it out to the man behind the counter, who read it, and then smiled, dropped the coin into his till and gave her two, smaller coins in change.

The chocolate shot rich sugary hope through her veins. She walked along streets she thought she had forgotten. She stopped to smell a single pink rose leaning over a garden wall, like a microphone waiting for someone to speak. She watched the clouds chasing each other across an endless sky.

When she reached the bridge, it was empty. She stepped onto it – felt the slight give of the metal underneath her feet. In the very middle of the bridge was a small parcel wrapped in brown paper. She knew, then, that she would never see the man again. She held the parcel against her chest and leaned over the side of the bridge to watch the water slip past beneath her.

When she had done with watching the water, the woman sat down, in the middle of the bridge, with the book resting on her lap, and opened the parcel. Inside was a black velvet bag. Inside the bag was a silver box. Inside the box was a pen – gold-cased, with a lid that gave a soft click when she pulled it off. She ran the nib across the back of her hand: green ink, the colour of his eyes. She turned to the next page of the book. It was blank, just as she'd known it would be. She started to write: *Once upon a time, a woman lived in a house with a small garden, in the city she had been born in. And there was nothing very remarkable about it, until the city forgot who she was.*