

Keystone

The first time he sees the arched stone bridge, Michael is transfixed. He counts the stones, each hand-hewn from rough quarry lumps, each wedged tight, constricting air. He holds his breath, and then lets it burst out. Holds and bursts. It is mid-afternoon so foot traffic on the bridge is intermittent. His hands clench and unclench. His sneakers dampen in the winter-tufted grass at the river's edge.

Alice waits an hour, maybe more, then tugs gently at the sleeve beside his elbow; the only place he tolerates her touch. She's a little worried he'll slip into something, not the river, not that. This moment has been a long time in the planning. She doesn't want it to go wrong

Michael is counting again, aware only of stones whispering in airless spaces, whispering their patterns, whispering, *safe, safe, safe*. He lifts a hand and shapes an arc. If he were a dancer it would be a graceful movement but he is a not-quite man. A not-quite-all-there almost man.

"Do you like the arch?"

He hears her question but it's not the right one. It's not the arch that matters. It's the stones. Without the stones, without their clinging together, there would be no arch. If just one stone shifted...

As the light changes it seems that one stone is always on the verge of breathing itself some space. He watches. No stone shifts, but is that because he watches? What if he looked away? He doesn't. There are people on the bridge who are now his responsibility.

Alice has to phone his mother, explain that they'll not be home for a while. She doesn't admit her mistake. It's only a sort-of mistake because she knows how to put it right. She does deals to get him in the car. They wait until no one is on the bridge; no one is even walking towards the bridge. She holds people back; asks them to go the long way around. Some do. Some don't even want to try to understand.

When he was small his mother covered the car window with a towel so he couldn't see but Michael can sense a bridge from tyres reverberating over unearthed tarmac. He frets and flails until allowed to check the bridge's spans – its structure – its solidity.

Jill's joke with the psychologists, that she could hire him out to the Ministry of Works, wore thin. Michael was four when he overheard them say *fixation*. The page in his dictionary is greasy from his fingers stroking the definition. '*an alchemical term denoting the process of reducing volatile spirit to a permanent bodily form.*'

Alice doesn't have much time for the psychologists but all the same she's mapped out routes to avoid bridges, which is not easy in a twin-river city built over streams and culverts and fissures in the earth. Michael's fixation means avoiding highways and rail bridges altogether. There is no stopping on these, no way to check for safety. Alice has broken the rule by taking him to this arched stone bridge. She's certain he's ready. He is an almost-man so they cannot keep him from bridges forever. He needs to learn how to manage. He needs bridges. He needs her.

The arched stone bridge is a few minutes walk from the library. Michael has noted the exact distance and though restless to get there he keeps to ritual because rituals cling together, they make him tangible.

The librarians watch out of the corners of their eyes as he builds book bridges in the reference section, which Michael says is the best because the books are bigger and people don't want them anymore because of the computers, which are faster at finding information but not faster than Michael. He tells Alice, *name an animal, a plant, a bridge type*. She sets the timer on her phone and he has the facts at his fingertips within 5 – 8 – 9.6 seconds. The librarians clap in soft-flesh library-appropriate applause. Michael checks the shelves before he replaces the books. He will tell Alice which ones are unsafe but the librarians have secured them all with screws and blutak. Shelves are bridges for books, but not for people. He learned that in his short time at school. His mimicry is perfect. *Shelves are not for people, Michael. They are for books. Now get down!*

His mother found a school they could get to without crossing a single bridge as long as she took the long, roundabout route. Poor Jill, she didn't know about the playground bridge built of planks and chains. Michael had to check it every day, every hour; it was that sort of bridge. Nobody wanted his fixation at school. Nobody wanted him screaming at kids to get off the bridge because it wasn't safe. Was he the only one who could see the sucking void beneath? His mother begged them to replace it with something more substantial. She offered to pay.

Why should we spoil the other children's fun just because of Michael?

When Jill complained they weren't prepared to adapt Michael imagined the principal as a *Gigantopithecus*. Extinction is a good and solid thing for one's enemies.

After the first time Alice met him she crocheted a string bridge and strung it across the doorframe. Each stitch was tight and secure. She showed him pictures of swing bridges on the Internet and he figured out for himself that the kids at school were safe on the plank bridge but he didn't tell anyone so he didn't have to go back.

Alice had no training as a care worker. It just came naturally. She found a way with him that no one else had before. Everyone said that.

Alice was his keystone. They built bridges together from whatever they found.

They return to the arched stone bridge only after the deal is negotiated. If he sets his watch to the right time then he can come back to his bridge every week after the library. Deals stack like stones, squeezing out unstable air.

'Your bridge', Alice calls it. It is that special just as she knew it would be.

The second time Michael sees the arched stone bridge his legs shudder and shake so he spins in circles, each time with a swift turn of the head like a ballerina spotting her centre. He tries to catch a stone in the process of shifting but they stay firm. When Alice tugs his sleeve and points out the plaque, he hears the stones whisper, *safe*. He walks onto the bridge, light on his toes because this is what joy feels like. He traces the plaque words with his fingers.

built in 1863-1864.

width of 27 ft and 6 in

widened by adding wing piers

66 ft

Michael slips into a moving rhythm so the facts Tetris-drop into place, solid, multi-dimensional facts. He ricochets from side to side, touches the wrought iron rail, volte-face and back again. This is okay when foot traffic is light but at lunchtime Alice has to conduct the flow around him, avoid collisions, ask people to wait. Some smile and nod but others seem dislodged, unsafe even.

She's not ready when Michael stops solid right in the centre with the keystone of the arch beneath his feet, so it is her body that collides with his. Her chest touches his, her nose bumps his ear, and she grabs his arm to steady herself.

There, in the middle of the bridge, he crushes her close. He holds her with one arm and leans his head back. His other arm describes an arc in the air. This is the first time they have touched in over nine years of Michael and Alice building bridges.

Alice is dizzy with joy. *We make the arch. We hold his world up. The two of us!*

A man with a briefcase stops. His eyes check with Alice that she is all right. He has no idea what to do if she asks for his help but he feels he ought to offer it. He can see that there is something not-all-there about Michael. He plays it light "Hey son, be gentle with your Mum."

"I'm his care worker," Alice says by way of explanation. She is feeling a little worried by the tightness of the arm across her chest.

The arm drops. Hands clench and unclench. Michael steps back as her words wedge into the spaces he has cleared. He spins, right there in the middle of the busy bridge, his head flicking to keep her in sight.

In all those nine years he had thought she was a fellow bridge builder.

The keystone beneath him slips.

He will not even allow her to touch the sleeve next to his elbow to haul him
back.