**Burning Bridges**

*Cole Castonguay*

Nirvana, drifting down to earth.

On January 19th, 1977, the city of Tampa Bay had its first and only snowfall in recorded history. Millions of residents came outside to marvel at the once-in-a-lifetime phenomenon.

The city’s winter infrastructure was nonexistent, and the beautiful white roads caused hundreds of car accidents. One unlucky minivan lost traction while turning aside for an ambulance and tragically plunged off the Sunshine Skyway Bridge. The minivan flipped over the concrete barrier at the bridge’s peak, dropping for 3.4 gut-wrenching seconds before killing all three occupants on impact.

January 19th, 1977 happens to be the date of my birth. My mom went into labor at the peak of the snowstorm and opted to make the odyssey out to the hospital. Halfway there, our car’s engine started belching black smoke, forcing us to pull over. My mom was vomiting on the snowy road when a passing ambulance picked my parents up and brought them to the hospital, where she underwent a near-miraculous two-hour labour and birthed a healthy baby girl. I sometimes wonder if we were on that fateful ambulance that caused the deadly accident. The timeline and route match up. Maybe it was a twisted exchange with the universe, trading my life for their deaths. If so, I have to wonder what makes me worth three people. I’m still waiting to find out.

The only company willing to take me on with good full-time pay out of college was the ABCD (American bridge consultants and designers. Most of them were the kind of folks who’d prefer a less interesting acronym.) Unfortunately, the lucrative wages meant a next-day flight to Anchorage, Alaska. I stepped onto the plane with only my purse and a puny suitcase that still cost me fifty-seven dollars and twelve cents to check.

My first day in Anchorage is to explore the town before I get loaded up with work. I trudge down the central street until I spot my destination, designated by a tacky wooden sign. The white paint is chipped and faded into a dull grey that matches the landscape. According to my uncle, this dinky shop has the best salmon in the continental United States. I’m beginning to question if it’ll be worth the walk from my apartment. A bell twinkles as I step through the door, alerting the two people inside the shop. A short man with hairy arms and a reddish face stands behind the counter. Across from him is an Inuit man in his 30s with a beautiful dark fur jacket that matches his deep tan skin. His nose is slightly crooked, probably broken and put back. The whole building smells like my dirty underwear.

“Welcome to Andre’s. What d’you want?” asked the hairy man.

“Could I get a quarter kilo of smoked salmon?”

“How many pounds?”

I’d gotten so used to using metric for designs, I forgot it was barely used across America.

“I’ll take, ah... half a pound, then.”

Hairy reaches for the knife as the man with the crooked nose sidles up next to me.

“New ‘round here?” he asks. He’s about as tall as me, but he has the face of a fighter.

“Why’s it matter to you?”

“Just wonderin’.”

I glance back to Hairy, but he’s slower than molasses. He’s still slicing a piece from the salmon. Trapped, I turn back to the man.

“I’m here with work.”

“What kinda work do we have for a lovely lady like you?”

“I’m designing the Gravina Island bridge.”

His eyebrows shot up. “You’re working on the bridge to nowhere??”

“What do you mean?”

“You mean you haven’t heard its nickname?”

“It goes to the airport, doesn’t it? Doesn’t sound like nowhere to me.”

“400 million dollars to do what the ferry does already for six bucks? Might as well be.”

“Wasn’t that one of the things that got Palin elected?”

His upper lip curled when he heard the name. “She hasn’t done us any good. My people are getting the short end of the stick, paying what little we have so more *Cheechakos* can come and fuck over the land.” Spittle sprays from his mouth with the last few words.

I shift away from him. “Hm.”

Hairy comes to my rescue, plopping a small paper bag on the counter. “That’ll be twelve bucks.”

I pull my wallet from the depths of my winter jacket and use my long silver nails to pry out my credit card from the cluster of expired gift cards.

Hairy is already shaking his head. “Cash only.”

I give him a blank stare in reply.

“I don’t have a card reader. Cash only,” he repeats.

“Are you kidding? What kind of a shop doesn’t have a card reader?”

He spits in a silver bucket at his feet, then shrugs.

I rifle through the various pockets of my wallet to no avail. I only manage to dig up five quarters and a ten-dollar bill. “Can’t you just forget the difference? It’s not even a buck,” I plead.

Hairy is reaching for the bag when the man with the crooked nose tosses a handful of quarters on the counter. He flashes me a grin.

Hairy grudgingly takes the money and pushes the paper bag forwards. “Bring cash next time.”

*There won’t be a next time*, I tell myself. I glance over my shoulder to the man with the crooked nose. “Thanks.”

I snatch the bag and go.

*-stening to the 103.5 Anchorage Radio net-*

*-ooh, I’m a rebel just for kicks, now… I been feel-*

*-drovich and back to Martins again, the puck is-*

*-girl… yooouuu my, my brown eyed girl…*

I let go of the knob, satisfied. Van Morrison’s voice sounds unusually scratchy. I can’t tell if it’s the station or the car. My hands don’t discriminate, tapping long-long-short to the calypso beat. I’m so engrossed in the rhythm, I almost don’t notice the moose in the middle of the road. I screech on the brakes and feel the back wheels of the car go weightless. The moose is barely two feet from the hood, but it’s unfazed. It looks at me with intelligent round eyes and twitches its ears. The moment is shattered by a truck’s honk from behind me. The moose doesn’t budge, instead opting to squeeze out a pile of shit onto the road. Yuck. No, yuck isn’t right. I might’ve died if I hit the moose. I think back to the exchange at my birth. Maybe it’s less of a purchase and more of a loan. I flick off the radio sheepishly.

I run into the man with the crooked nose again that night. He’s wandering the docks with a soup thermos.

“I love the mountains. My friend used to call them nature’s skyscrapers.”

He wipes his nose with the edge of his sleeve. “The mountains are nice. I prefer the ocean, though.”

“I’m not an ocean girl. It’s dark and cold and filled with god knows what.”

“But there’s so much life down there! Up here, it’s a wasteland.”

I can feel the heat of his body beside me. “That just helps me focus. I can spot all the little differences in the rocks and trees. That’s my favourite thing about nature, nothing is the same.”

He cracks a warm smile. “I’m with you there. I can’t stand all the manufactured junk nowadays. None of it has a story.”

“That’s what I try to do with my designs. That friend of mine said that to be a good builder, you need to be an artist.”

“That friend of yours seems very quotable.”

“He was.” I look over to the sun winking below the horizon. It’s not as colourful as the ones back home, only offering a pale golden glow, but there’s something mystical about the sky’s deep blue stain. It’s like I’m staring into murky ocean depths.

The man with the crooked nose interrupts my musings. “Do you think there’s life out there?”

His gaze followed mine towards the night sky. The stars cast a brilliant glow that I’ve never seen before. “Logically, yeah. I don’t feel like I’m ever going to see it, though.”

He sniffles. “I’m just glad it exists. I think the universe is like a big machine, and we just need to do our part.”

I’m already subconsciously shaking my head. “I don’t think it’s all a big machine. I read that with the expansion of the universe, we can’t ever travel outside of our local galaxy. We can look at them, but we’re really just alone.”

“I know I’m not alone.”

I notice a glimmer of green light. Is that the sunset?

He chuckles. “Perfect timing. It’s the *aksarniq*.”

“What the hell is *aksarniq*?”

“Sorry. The northern lights.”

“You cued them in like a god damn wizard.”

He crinkles his face and waves his arms. “One, two, yagabougou, you’re a beluga.”

I snort, but the northern lights draw my attention like a fly to a lantern. Shimmering lines the colour of spring grass etch themselves across the sky as if drawn by a divine artist. We both drift to a stop, an unspoken agreement.

“Have you heard the legend of the northern lights?” he whispers. His voice is raspy and barely audible, like he doesn’t want to interrupt my moment.

“No,” I breathe.

“My grandmother told me it’s the spirits of the dead coming out to dance.”

I zip up my coat collar, waiting for him to continue. “That’s it?”

I can see a faint red tinge colour his cheeks, illuminated by the lights. “My grandmother tells it better.”

We stand there for half an hour gazing into the sky.

I can’t fall asleep. Every time I close my eyes, green flashes ripple across my vision. Every subtle cavity of the mattress is amplified the longer I lie there. I roll over, facing the man with the crooked nose, but that only makes it worse. I give up and fling off the covers. First my underwear, then my pants and shirt, and finally I put on my old-school Helly Hansen winter coat and slide on my sneakers. I look back at the man with the crooked nose. His chest heaves up and down like waves lapping against the shore. I slide a pen out of my jacket pocket and scrawl my number on the nearest scrap of paper. I stare at it clasped inside my fingers and change my mind. I stuff it in my pocket and slip out the door.

I’ve always been a slow walker. There are more fast walkers than ever nowadays in the fast-paced modern work environment, especially in cities like mine. Even in modest-sized Tampa Bay, pedestrians constantly bump me from behind as they slip by. Their eyes jitter from either panic, coffee, or coke. The most successful and the least always have the same crazy eyes. Anytime I’m in the city, I might look to my right and see a gaunt man in a ripped shirt two sizes too big threatening a garbage can, then to my left and see a well-groomed businessman screaming orders into his iPhone.

Alaska is refreshing, but also eerie. The kilometer-long walk back to my own bed feels alien. I can’t quite put my finger on it. The docks draw my attention, and I give a curt glance over both shoulders before resting my back against a weathered steel support pillar. The ocean and the sky are the same shade of void. Its strange absence is calming. Just like the lights, it absorbs my consciousness. Its siren song of silence just feels… right. I’m not really capable of explaining it better than that. All the colours and sounds of society suddenly seem wearisome. I just want to sleep.

A ripple of water in the distance cracks my concentration. A round head the size of a basketball is coming towards me. My train of thought leaps to polar bears, and my instincts drag me three steps back before the rest of me knows what’s happening. I look around for a weapon, but I’m forced to settle for a wrench about six inches long with the sienna stains of saltwater. My eyes finally focus on the dark shape. It’s only a harbour seal. I let out a long exhale of breath and watch as the grey vortex ascends into the sky until it dissipates. Maybe it’s time to get walking again.

*bzzzzzt*

“Hello?”

“Hey, it’s me. The guy you hung out with yesterday. We watched the lights.”

“Oh... how’d you get my number?”

“I found it online. Listen... I feel like I really connected with you last night. Do you want to go on another date?“

“Not... Maybe. I’m not sure. Can you call me later? It’s like 4am.”

“Sure. Yeah, no prob-”

*Beep*

*bzzzzzt*

*bzzzzzt*

*bzzzzzt*

“I told you, call me back later, I ha-”

“Is this Charlotte Menzies?”

“Oh, I’m so sorry, I thought you were someone else.”

“You’re the operating architect on the Gravina Island Bridge, correct?”

“Yeah. I’ll be over there in fifteen minutes, just-”

“You don’t need to rush. I hate to have to tell you, but...”

“What’s wrong?”

“Some delinquent set fire to the bridge’s foundations.”

“Shit. How bad is it?”

“We would have to rebuild them completely. The government is losing interest, the whole project is already going way over budget. They just cut funding for the project.”

“Cut funding? By how much?”

“All of it.”

“What? But... my contract...”

“We’ll pay you for your time and fly you back. Today’s your last day, just help wrap things up.”

“Seriously? Why?”

“Public support issues. Folks see it as useless spending. Hell, even the locals call it a bridge to nowhere. Doesn’t exactly justify the price tag of four hundred million. Tonight was just their cherry on top.”

“Oh, god... are you fucking kidding me? You’re just going to toss me back home and forget about it? They’ve been planning that bridge for five years, and this is the shitshow they get?!”

“I’m sorry, ma’am, I didn’t have a say in it.”

“...right. I’m sorry, your job must be awful.”

“You get used to it. Pay’s not bad. If you’re really desperate for work...”

“I’ll be fine. Thanks. I guess.”

*beep*

I toss a slice of salmon in the frypan, hesitate, and throw in the rest of what’s in the bag. The odor is intoxicating, a far cry from the fish shop’s suffocating miasma. I rifle through my suitcase until I spot the edge of my calculator, gleaming like an ancient artifact. Fifty-five meters times two, divided by the acceleration of gravity, and square rooted to finish it off. 3.4 seconds. I lay back in a chair while the salmon cooks, reminiscing.

I feel like understanding where someone comes from is important to understand who they are. People are shaped by their situations. If Barack Obama had grown up in gang-dominated Compton, he would’ve been lucky to reach adulthood, much less become president. In general, though, my childhood wasn’t very interesting. I never bothered making friends, preferring the company of the marble tracks and Lego sets in my room. Not much changed as I grew older, I just swapped plastic for wood. By my 14th birthday, we had more wooden stools than we knew what to do with, and I started selling them. Our neighbour was my best customer, an elderly man missing part of his foot. He spent most of his time in a wheelchair, and I suspect he never actually used my stools. He told me his wife had passed away four years ago, and the diligent young girl next door must have been an escape from his loneliness. I think my parents knew, too, since they started inviting him over for dinner. We spent most of the summer of 1992 together in my garage, tinkering side by side in peaceful silence. The first time I remember crying was when he had to move into a senior’s home the next winter. Strangely, when he died two years later, I couldn’t make myself shed a tear.

I grab a slice of salmon with my hand and cram it into my mouth. It melts in my mouth, leaving only a lingering sweetness. Suddenly ravenous, I dig my fingernails into another piece. Then another. Frugality is thrown out the window, and I finish the whole bag in a matter of minutes. Why wait any longer? I collapse into bed and sink into sleep.

The trip back home passes in a blur, a Jackson Pollock painting with splatters of clarity. I remember watching Good Will Hunting on the plane’s tiny television, and a lady with a fur jacket who tripped on the escalator and sprained her ankle. I didn’t stop to help. Now I can only keep walking, like a marathoner in the final stretch who can only think about the finish line. The familiar Tampa Bay sun feels alien and spiteful, singeing my exposed skin, but I’m unstoppable now. The Sunshine Skyway bridge finally soars into view.

The Sunshine Skyway Bridge is the highest bridge in Florida, an architectural masterpiece. It reaches up to fifty-five metres above sea level, providing ample room for the bay’s constant flow of ship traffic. It’s also notorious for its jumpers. Over three hundred and sixteen suicides have been recorded, as well as forty-five survivors. Thirty-nine of the survivors claim they regretted jumping. I wonder how many of those three hundred and sixteen people changed their minds in the 3.4 seconds before they hit. I hope I’m not one of them.

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|  | **Got it** | **On Your Way** | **Needs Work** |
| **Quality Writing** | All are met:  Dialogue, vivid word choice, stays on topic, good details, interesting/ creative, attention grabbing start, sentence variety | Some are met:  Dialogue, vivid word choice, stays on topic, good details, interesting/ creative, attention grabbing start, sentence variety. Setting is included and attempts to support the plot | Few are met:  Dialogue, vivid word choice, stays on topic, good details, interesting/ creative, attention grabbing start, sentence variety |
| **Conflict** | Main conflict is clear and adds to the story | Main conflict may be attempted but is not clear/partially developed | Main conflict is weak and not developed |
| **Point of View / Tense** | Clear and remains consistent (1st or 3rd) throughout the story Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_ Somewhat\_\_\_\_\_ | | |
| **Theme** | Clear and well presented. The theme is purposefully supported by the plot and characters of the story | The theme is present, but it may be simple or surface-level | Theme may be present but is unclear or undeveloped |
| **Format and Conventions** | Formatting of essay is perfect, and 0-3 spelling, punctuation, or grammar errors are present. Paragraphs and dialogue are used appropriately | Formatting of essay is perfect, and 4-6 spelling, punctuation, or grammar errors are present. Paragraphs and dialogue are used somewhat appropriately | 1 or more formatting errors exist, and/or 7+ spelling, punctuation, or grammar errors are present. Paragraphs and dialogue are not used appropriately |
| **Postmodern Conventions** | There are elements of postmodern theory that are well placed in the narrative and is useful in finding out the meaning of the theme / purpose. (Slice of life/ dialogue/ small appearing large/ shift in focus) | The postmodern thematic lens doesn’t work as well within the narrative. There can be instances of the narrative being forced instead of seamlessly integrated. Some elements are seen, but not naturalized. | Postmodern theory has no real use of being in the story or is not even apparent. The logic is faulty. The writer put no thought into this convention. |