



**WALKING
ON THE
BRIDGE**

KEITH D EDINBURGH

WALKING ON THE BRIDGE

TWO DAYS AGO I decided to kill myself.

Yesterday I settled on the how (I've always loved the sea). Today, I chose the where. And, I suppose, the why.

Ironically, automatically, I bought a return ticket. The never-to-be-used little piece of card sleeps in my pocket, dreaming of being useful. I decide not to dash its hopes and stare out of the window. The train is overtaking the outskirts of Edinburgh, which is already fading from being my home to becoming my birthplace.

There's no reason for me to cross the bridge. I could get off at the stop before and walk from there. But I've always loved it: the epileptic strobing of the girders as they slip past, the child-like hope that one day — one day — the train will go over the russet steel ribs like a roller coaster rather than taking its normal, no-nonsense,

everyday route.

So I treat myself. One last time before I go. I think I deserve it after everything.

As the train crosses, I close my eyes and imagine myself ascending and descending and ascending and descending, but that actually makes me feel worse. There's always a descent. Always.

I walk down from the station, through a snug huddle of bungalows. Their windows accuse me as I pass, their curtains ready to snap shut in outrage. It's about an hour before dark and the sun is already dipping behind the hills, giving everything that neither nor feeling. Which feels appropriate.

Again, I make a detour. I'm not procrastinating, far from it. This has all been planned, run over a thousand times in my head since this morning. One last time over the bridge, and one last time underneath.

It spans above me like a pathway to another time, a giant construction set bolted together by optimism, hard graft and — according to the memorial on the opposite shore — death. It casts a long shadow, a stretched-out version of itself rippling across the water.

The other bridge, the one I'm walking towards now, can't compete. Like an unplanned child staring with bitter jealousy at its favoured elder sibling. Upright and

indignant, but bowing upwards in the middle with the straining pressure of simply being itself.

I follow the path along the shoreline. Birds wheel in the space between the bridges. A single sailboat flaps out in the water. Hopefully it'll be gone by the time I'm ready.

I pretend the noise from the rush hour stragglers is the road bridge roaring, though I've not decided if it's to scare me away or to beckon me up there, onto its back.

There are two walkways across it, one on either side of the four-lane road. Flanked by railings, and separated from the traffic by a gap, like a 150-foot deep gutter.

I'm on the walkway furthest from the rail bridge. I've said my goodbye to it, I don't want to be facing it when the time comes. Once I'm out, over the water, the wind whips at me, gusting slaps from the west. I zip up my jacket and walk on.

It's easy to tell when I'm at the middle, at the crest of the bridge's curving back. I stop there and turn to face the wind. It's dark now.

In my peripheral vision, I see a light approach from my left. A cyclist. He slows down as he passes, but keeps on going. I turn to watch him shrink into the distance,

but he stops, a couple of hundred yards from me. Another light appears, cold and bright, as he takes out his phone. The light dances in the darkness as I see him look at it, then put it to his ear, then look at it again before he puts it away and cycles off.

So, my face must be out there. I've not got much time. That's okay. I knew that.

I look over the side, over the railings. A gull flies beneath me, swooping under the bridge and out of sight. For the first time since deciding, I feel something. Not quite fear, but similar. A tug in my gut that makes me want to fly, not fall.

That's when she appears.

White dress, barefoot. Hair like my memory of the sun. She has the face of every woman I've ever known and the eyes of the only woman I've ever loved.

She walks towards me, closing the space between us. Her eyes shine, despite the darkness, like there's a light inside her. When she smiles, it's as if everything drops away and splashes into nothing.

I'm scared to speak to her, in case she disappears. She nods, as if sensing my thoughts.

Her face has changed now. It's not just her eyes any more.

It's her.

I'm aware now of the tears on my face. I don't know how long I've been crying.

She looks at me with concern, not pity. Raises her hand, as if to wipe my face. Then stops, and speaks.

'What's that on your shirt?'

I look down. I'm sure I was careful not to get any stains on my clothes. My shirt blinks back at me, pristine. I frown, then can't help smiling as she flicks my nose with her forefinger, not nearly hard enough to hurt.

'You fall for that every time,' she says, with the saddest expression I've ever seen.

My tears are the only warmth I can feel.

'It's not too late, you know. You can still go back.'

I imagine the ticket inside my pocket waking up, stirring with excited anticipation. I shake my head.

'You're dead,' I say.

'I know.' Her smile returns. 'It's okay.'

'But I — '

She places a finger to my lips. Her touch is cold, like I remember her skin being.

‘I forgive you.’

There’s no point in saying any more.

For some reason, I bend down and check my shoelaces are tied tight. When I stand up again, she’s gone.

The railings aren’t really any obstacle. I’m surprised the walkway isn’t caged in. More people do it every year than they like to admit, like the bridge is a siren drawing them to it.

A car speeds past. There’s no indication of the driver having spotted me. But I stay still, here on the other side of the railings, just in case.

I’m hanging on with my hands behind me, leaning out and over the water below. In this light, it’s blank, invisible. But I can feel it beneath me, swelling and falling, ascending and descending.

I don’t know why I wait. When they arrive and get out of the car, I turn my head to look at them. I’m not sure if they’re armed or not. The state I left her in this morning, I wouldn’t be surprised if they were. Couldn’t blame them.

They’re pointing things at me anyway, maybe just wanting to make me think they’ve got guns. One of them, the youngest looking, shouts at me. Something about it all being over and how I need to come back from the edge and keep my hands

where they can see them.

She's gone.

I put one leg back over the railings, straddling them.

Things could still go either way.

Behind the police, the rail bridge is lit up like a trio of skeletal Christmas trees. More pointing and shouting. The screech as another car, unmarked, melts its tires on the road. Slamming doors.

Looking past it all, I see a train start to cross the bridge.

It blows its horn, then, clanking with the effort of pulling the string of carriages behind it, it starts to ascend the first of the great steel peaks.

I smile and look back at the men pointing things at me and shouting.

I reach into my jacket pocket.

There's a noise.

I watch as the return ticket spiral-dances its way down towards the invisible, descending water.

Then I go quietly.

Walking On The Bridge - Keith D Edinburgh

Thanks for reading

www.keithdedinburgh.com