

THE CROSSING DANCE

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Amy found the old logging bridge on the day her parents told her that her little brother, Cory, was sick. The bridge wasn't in too bad of shape then, at least for walking over. Some of the planks had rotted away, leaving holes where decayed wood dropped into the creek below, but the structure of the bridge appeared sound. To Amy, the huge foundation logs looked as if they had years left in them still.

Amy leaped over the holes and stepped on the soundest spots. Step here, then there, left, then left again, then right, then one big jump, and she was over. She walked into the alder forest crowding the logging road on the other side. Without hesitation. As if she knew where she was going. When the road veered to the right, Amy didn't. She went through the woods, straight to the abandoned house she had never seen before.

It was the remains of an old homestead. The rough hewn, board house was shaded by the mountain behind it and one corner had collapsed under a windblown tree. The fenceposts leaned like drunken men. No fields or open places were left around the house. A jungle of foliage enveloped the simple structures.

Amy sat in the dust on the kitchen floor. She knew it was the kitchen because there were cupboards and an old table. She sat looking at the chipped cup on the table. It was sky-blue. Startling in such a colorless room. She sat there for a long time and looked at it and tried not to think. At dusk, she got up and went back across the bridge, then home.

"Where have you been?" demanded her mom. "I've been worried sick."

"I went for a walk in the woods," Amy replied. "That's okay, isn't it?"

Her mom sighed. After all, Amy was thirteen. And there were so many other things to worry about. And arrangements to be made. And Cory's nosebleed to stop. It had already lasted a whole day.

Amy went across the bridge again the next day. Step here, then there, left, then left again, then right, then one big jump. Exactly like before. Amy knew the bridge had to be crossed the same way. There was only one right way to go across. Things could never change. She wouldn't let them. She sat on the floor and looked at the cup. Blue. Chipped.

That night Amy went to stay with her aunt. Her mom and dad were in Vancouver with Cory. The nosebleed hadn't stopped. In the noisy rooms of her aunt's home, she made herself an outsider. She needed to be someplace else. She dreamed of crossing the bridge every night. She did the crossing dance in her sleep.

A month later her parents came back. Her brother too. But he was different. White. Weak. Quiet.

Her parents barely smiled when they saw her.

Amy went to the bridge as soon as she could. This time she sat and looked for a long time. She could hear the water beneath it, lying restless in its bed. She strained to hear, to understand, in case it had something important to say – but it sounded frivolous, like muffled giggles. She wanted something to make her feel strong.

“This bridge will stand forever,” she said out loud. But when she crossed it, she stepped carefully. Gingerly. Exactly like before.

The house was unchanged. The dust and decay, the table, the cup, they all looked the same. Amy sat in the corner and thought of how things would be when her brother became well. Her mom and dad would notice her then. She could tease her brother again. He was such a little brat! She thought of the ways she would punish him for the last month. Soon. When he was better.

A month went by, and two. The trail that went straight as an arrow through the trees was worn into existence. It could be traveled at night and was. On these nights, Amy wouldn't stay at the old house. She would come back to the bridge, sit on the far side, and listen. The water trickled or gurgled or roared, depending on the amount of rainfall. Amy wondered how the bridge could withstand so much. All that torrent and debris and life passing beneath it. And yet it always stood so immovable. Unchanged.

During the fall days, Amy watched the salmon for hours as they splashed and spawned, giving everything they had in a final burst of effort. Just before they died they would slip on their sides and be swept away, their bodies finally becoming as fluid as the current that birthed them. When they lodged on a sand bar or were caught in a back eddy of the creek, Amy marveled that they rarely struggled, but lay there and let their final energy ebb away. She found it hard to tell when they really died.

One morning the snow came. The world became muffled in a white silence that was so loud it drowned the noise. Amy knew no one would hear her even if she screamed, so she wandered the still forest and sat in the still house. Not screaming. Just watching. Waiting. Sometimes she would lie on the ice under the bridge. She loved to feel the life vibrating beneath the thin shell. She thought of it as an unborn dragon, waiting to be released. Waiting to make everything right. She longed for spring.

And, then it came! A gushing, torrential rush of brown water that made the old bridge tremble.

As life crept back into the forest, Amy began to see that hope lived in the abandoned house as well. Sunlight fell on green shoots growing between floorboards. Birds nested and hatched and thrived in the rafters. One young fledgling knocked the sky-blue cup to the floor. Amy couldn't see the chipped edge anymore from where she sat. But she didn't move anything. Didn't change anything. It wasn't hers to change. She was a guest privileged to watch as life reclaimed the old house day by day, week by week.

Throughout the spring and summer, Amy searched her parent's faces for hope. Everything had to get better soon. She teased Cory now and then just to test him, waiting for the smile to become brighter than the time before.

In the fall Amy went back to school. One September day when she got off the bus, she saw her mother's car circling the field beside their house. When Amy saw the driver, she threw her books beside the road and ran into the field waving her arms. Cory shook his head when she asked if their mom said he could drive the car.

"You won't tell, will you?" he asked.

“No way. Let’s go,” Amy said and jumped in beside him.

Cory grinned and the car shot forward. They bounced across the field, heads almost hitting the roof. Amy couldn’t stop herself from laughing out loud. Finally. Finally it had happened - Cory was getting better! She’d known it was going to happen and she was right. She glanced over at him. He was pale and thin behind the wheel of the car, but his eyes glowed like they used to. She marveled at how she used to hate that mischievous look. Never again.

They turned at the far side of the field and Amy could see her mom come out on the porch and shade her eyes against the sun. She glanced over at Cory. He was so low in the seat he couldn’t see her standing there.

“Let’s stay on this side of the field,” Amy suggested. “It’s not as bumpy.”

Cory turned the wheel and they went into a tight spin. Amy’s lightness bubbled up inside her again, uncontrollable, irrepressible. They hit a few more bumps and the car slowed.

Amy looked over at Cory and the laughter faded. “Are you alright, Cory?” she asked.

“Yeah...I’m fine,” he panted. “Just a...little...tired.” The car rolled to a stop. The ragged sound of Cory’s breath grew to fill the confining space. Amy couldn’t breathe either; it was as if he was sucking the air from her lungs. She watched in panicky silence as their mom ran toward them. Then Cory’s skeletal fingers brushed the top of her hand. Tears prickled Amy’s eyes when her hand pulled away, just a little. He was trying to touch the gear shift, she reasoned. Then their mom was there.

“I’m sorry, Mom” gasped Cory. He slowly slid over so she could get behind the steering wheel. “I just wanted to drive a car.”

There was a pause, then a controlled reply. “I know, honey.”

When they got back to the house, Amy said she had to go get her books but instead, she ran to the old house. She sat in the corner and remembered the light she’d seen in Cory’s eyes. Where did it go?

Why didn’t he just get better? It wasn’t fair! What was he waiting for? Amy wanted to cry, to scream to the heavens. She wanted to jump up and

smash the blue cup against the wall. But she couldn't. She would destroy everything if she did. Everything.

Still, Cory changed after that day. He didn't smile when Amy half-heartedly tried to tease him, so she stopped trying. He became a stranger to her. All of his hair was gone now and his dark eyes, huge and sunken. His pallid skin stretched taut over a framework of bones, sharp pale edges on soft pale sheets. Only his ears seemed to get stronger, as if it hurt him to hear. Amy and her parents crept quietly around the house, stepping softly. Whispering in corners.

Then one day her mom made her climb the stairs to his room. That was the day Amy saw that it hurt him to live. They pretended to play chess until Cory said he was too tired. Amy felt the muscles of her face twist into a hideous mask when she tried to smile at him. She couldn't form the words "See you later."

Afterward she ran to the bridge. She stared blankly at the broken planks and rotting logs for a long time. Then slowly, methodically, she began to cross.

Step here. Then there. Left. Then left again. Then stop.

When she couldn't take the next step, she knew it was finally over. Wetness erupted from her eyes, nose, and mouth – a river emerging from underground caverns. The roaring in her head drowned the sound of the creek. The bridge came up, hard and slivered, to slam against her body. And there she heaved for a long time, giving up hope. When she could hear the creek again, it was dark.

Three days later he was dead. In six he was buried. His things were eventually packed away and carried to the attic to collect dust. His room became just another empty space. It didn't even have sadness in it anymore. That was locked away in more secret places. Then the keys were hidden.

It took Amy a year to return to the bridge. The fish had returned too – but the bridge was gone, washed away in some fall or spring flood. She sat on the bank and watched the salmon thrash out their lives in the water below. She thought of the old house she would never see again. Were there birds

nesting in the rafters this year? Was grass still growing between the floorboards? Maybe the roof had completely collapsed and wild roses were now busy turning the broken heap into a garden. A garden with a sky-blue soul.

She only hoped there were no baby birds in the house when it went down.

Then she got up, turned away from the rustling creek. Automatically her feet found the rhythm one more time. Step here, then there, left, then left again, then right, then one big jump.

Then home.