

## The Bridge

Abigail Petersen

*Haley had no idea why she agreed to meet with him. She shook her head as she made her way down the abandoned street to their usual meeting spot, a little ledge set against a cement bridge. Zain never explained why he liked that place so much, but it was a walkable distance from her house and she liked how comfortable Zain looked when they were there. The thought of Zain's smile made her feel things she didn't like. She tried to shake the feeling and continued her way down the street, the brisk evening air clinging to her hoodie.*

*Zain was never one to invite girls to do anything. He spent most of his time with his boys and the crew, mostly comprised of young men and occasionally their families. But as the sun was setting outside his house, he felt the need to see her. He couldn't explain why and it honestly kind of pissed him off that he thought about her at all, but there she was, assaulting his psyche. When they first started hanging out, he kept his personal life pretty private, evading questions about his family or occupation. Even now, Haley knew very little about his life or him, but he found himself showing her other things about him. His favorite spot, for starters. A small cement square set into an overpass. He brought her there often. The view of the city was breathtaking, every time.*

"What's it like?" Haley asked and took another drag off Zain's joint. He kept his hand extended for her to take a second hit and gave her a look.

"What's what like?" He watched as her bloodshot eyes swept over him again. He wondered if she truly saw him. Or did she just see the idea of him as they made their way through his weed stash?

"Losing?" she chuckled and pushed his hand away, washing the ash down with a swig of Pink Whitney.

He rolled his eyes and wondered why he kept her around. She was pretty, with long hair that hit her waist and sapphire eyes that judged his every move. He thought back to what he was doing this morning; he knew she'd run the second trouble hit. For him, it was just another Tuesday.

"You want more or can I put this out?" The joint was giving him a headache. Or maybe it was her attitude. Either way, something had to change. He thought about cutting her off. It wouldn't be hard. With social media nowadays, he could disappear from the face of the planet at any moment. The longer this high hit, the more he contemplated it.

He looked over at Haley. Her piercing stare sliced through him, leaving him almost bare in front of her. He could never hide his emotions from her, which was one of the things that terrified him about her.

"You're overthinking again," Haley whispered and tipped her head back to see the stars. She began her usual grounding technique before the high took her back to the dark place it often dragged her to. Little dipper, big dipper, Pisces or is that Cancer? Shit, I can't remember. She shook her head and drank some water.

"Maybe you should think more. Is there anything going on in that little head of yours, princess?" He settled onto the cement behind him and packed his stuff. "I should get you back to your dad before he kills me."

Haley continued staring at the stars. She knew her dad wouldn't be home till Friday after he was done on his business trip. Or as she liked to call it, an excuse to fuck his intern. Her mom was probably rolling in her grave right now thinking about it. The worst part was, he always pretended that he wasn't, as if she didn't hear them sometimes.

Zain watched her clench her jaw and look up at the stars. He wondered what went on in her head. He knew her thoughts went a million miles per hour, but she'd never let on. He also knew she got real quiet whenever he talked about her dad or her going home. Maybe it was a mix of the mystery or the fact that she sometimes gave a shit about him

that he kept her around. Maybe this exchange between them was mutual. She got away from home, and he could be more vulnerable around her than any of his friends.

Zain thought back to the one time she was vulnerable around him. He held her as she shook under the bridge downtown, her mascara streaking down her face in waves. She never told him what happened, but he could guess by the torn clothes and bruises on her arms. He never liked her ex-boyfriend and hated him more after that night. His friends may be street rats to most, but they were taught how to treat a woman right by mothers who stuck around. Haley's ex-boyfriend moved a few days later—after falling down the stairs after a rough night at the bar. At least, that's what the police report says.

"You're the first guy who doesn't want anything from me." It came out as a whisper, almost inaudible over the traffic.

Zain fixed his eyes on her, scared to speak in case she needed to say more.

Her eyes slowly opened and looked at him. A small smile tugged at the corner of her lips. "Thank you," was all she said as she made her way out of the nook of the bridge and down the street toward her house. Zain watched as she left, a cold breeze washed through where she was sitting and he shivered, missing her and that piercing gaze.

**Abigail Petersen** is a criminal justice and sociology major at UND. She enjoys writing fiction and poetry. She draws most of her inspiration from the world around her, music, and her pets.