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MY SISTER'S BRIDGE BY KATE SALLER

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I crossed my sister's bridge today. I was on my way home from a conference in Iowa, and I was driving down the highway she usually takes to get to my home, when I missed the turn-off for the short-cut. I kept on and came suddenly upon the entrance to a bridge. The road cut sharply to the left, rose up quickly, and abruptly tipped me into a narrow lane honed by on-coming traffic on one side and bright green girders and rails on the other. It was a fairly ordinary bridge. Through the railing supports I caught glimpses of the river, tumbling over rocks and logs, as the sunlight hit my face in Morse Code through the ironwork above me. In seconds I was released onto open, shouldered highway again. It was only then that I realized I had crossed her bridge.

I remembered then the look on her face when she had told me about it. It's so narrow, and high, and oh, how it sneaks up on you, she had said. She turned so white just at the telling that I quickly told her about the shortcut. The road is wide there, I told her, and the river is peaceful. You barely know you're on a bridge. She looked cross then, the way she does whenever I switch roles, suggesting she is the younger and I the older, wiser. Her face composed and she changed the subject to mothering. Her children are older than mine, so this is always safe ground for both of us. What is already past and assimilated for her is unknown for me.

As soon as I realized where I was, I turned off onto a road paralleling the river and parked so that I could walk down to the water's edge and see the bridge. Now I am perched on a rock where I can dip my hand into the water that has just traveled under the bridge. When I look up past the cement support columns, I can see the ramp leading up to the bridge entrance across the river. I watch the cars for a while, wondering how so much terror could have descended upon my sister in that spot, when the faces I see now are merely the unconcerned masks of people expecting to follow the road and end up on my side of the river. I notice a sign I had missed when I was driving that says "No Vehicles Over 8 Feet Wide." Had she known how wide her car was? Do I? I watch for several minutes, but no-one is swerving suddenly off the road, leaping out with a tape-measure and assessing their ability to fit into the space ahead. How trusting we all are.

If I had seen that sign and realized that this was the bridge my sister had crossed, I would have proceeded under the assumption that she had already determined that the bridge would accommodate our cars. Our father used to tease us about trust. My sister didn't trust anyone except herself, but I—he always said he'd have to get a shotgun when I started dating. One of

our family's favorite pieces of folklore revolved around trust, from a time before my memories began. It seems that one day, when she was four and I was two, we were at the community swimming pool and Mom was standing in water to her waist, trying to convince my sister to jump into her arms. Finally, exasperated with cajoling and explaining, Mom had shouted, "Just yell really loudly, 'I trust my Mommy,' and then close your eyes and jump." Still, my sister teetered on the edge while, several yards away, at the very deepest part of the pool, I stepped up to the edge, shouted, "I trust my Mommy" and leapt into the twelve-foot water with no-one near to catch me.

Five years after that incident, my sister and I were asked to be flower girls in a cousin's wedding. We were dressed in long, hoop-skirted taffeta dresses--hers was lavender, mine was mint green--and instructed to walk together down the aisle. My sister was to carry a basket of rose petals that she dropped on the carpet behind us, and I was to stay beside her, looking straight ahead, and carrying the pillow that held the wedding rings. We got through the rehearsals without a problem, but in the actual ceremony there was one point when I had to walk up the aisle first. When that time came, I simply couldn't move, in spite of the hissing and whispering of all of the adult members of the wedding party. Finally, one of them signaled to my sister to go ahead, and she began walking up the aisle. Without hesitating, I climbed out of the pew and followed her to the altar.

I've never asked her how she felt about my devotion--it can't have been fun to always have me as her shadow. As we progressed through our teens, my following was less physically "tagging along" and more a statement of philosophy. I just needed to know where she was, or what she thought, in relation to what I planned to do, and then I could do it. Sitting on my rock at the river's edge, I peer up at the girders positioned against the sky, and think of long-ago math classes when we were taught how to calculate the height of something by knowing the length of its shadow and the angle of the sun's declination. I know that I continually measure myself against my sister--I just wish I knew the right formula for obtaining the answer.

My sister was married before me, of course. I watched her agonize over all the wedding details for an entire summer while I was home from college. I had met her fiancé and had gotten to know him somewhat. In the way of two people who have shared space for so long, I knew without knowing that the event--the fact of marrying--was somehow obscuring the fact that she was planning a life with this man. Then, on a hot summer evening just before I returned to college, we were sitting in the living room discussing clothing styles. My sister pointed out how, even though we were both wearing flower-print cotton sleeveless dresses, the styles and colors were totally different. "Let's trade dresses," she cried suddenly, and before we knew it we were trying on each other's dresses and giggling as we had years before when we locked ourselves in our mother's closet and "played dress-up" with her clothes. We went laughing to the mirror in the hall and sobered immediately when we faced our own images dressed as each other. "Now we have to trade lives," she yelled. "No, no, I don't want to get married," I shouted back, and then we took off out the front door and chased each other around the yard in the dark. We laughed and darted among the trees and bushes we had haunted as children until, gasping for breath, we walked back into the house and upstairs to put on our own clothes. The following night I left for college and did not see her again until I flew home in September for her wedding.

I was her maid of honor, which meant I walked up the aisle directly in front of my sister, and stood next to her as she spoke her vows. At the end of the ceremony, dressed in the gown and headpiece she had selected for me, I turned to face a church full of people as my sister and her husband were sent out to begin their life. I was supposed to join the best man and walk out of the church behind her; but for some reason the best man was waiting for me to start, and I froze. I knew what I must do, but I couldn't move. Finally, the minister, realizing we weren't moving, intoned quietly, "You may now follow." Oh, no, I wanted to cry, don't you see that I can't? Something is wrong--she doesn't trust her own judgment here--how can I follow her? But the best man took my arm, and I did follow my sister out into the fall sunlight. A year later I was back in that church for my own wedding, and then she had two children, and then I did. The pattern of my life has followed her outline through all of the intervening years. I have

nurtured my children, pursued my career, loved my husband and come to know and accept myself, all the while keeping my sextant pointed toward her.

Suddenly the heat of the sun on this rock is unbearable, so I slip off my shoes, roll my jeans up over my knees and walk out into the edge of the river. I reach down and use my cupped hands to pour water over my arms. Staring at the waves rippling out in widening circles away from me, I let myself think about last week when she called, clearly needing to tell me something. I made a cup of tea, sat down at the kitchen table, and propped my feet on a chair to wait for her revelation. After asking about me, the boys, the weather, she quietly announced her plan to get a divorce. "We don't know each other any more--it's just that simple," she said. She hadn't called her son and daughter at college, yet, but she and her husband had already agreed to a trial separation. She had an apartment and was moving into it the next day. I listened to the details of her plan, still not comprehending its full impact, until she must have sensed my unspoken questions. "Wait until your kids are gone," she said. "Then you'll understand."

Above me I hear the clank-CLANK of cars on the bridge grating. I look up and watch them pass overhead, going about their everyday business on a sunny afternoon. Heedless of the eyes of drivers above me I walk into the water, welcoming its cold grip as it reaches my waist, my breasts, my shoulders. I think back to when I drove up the ramp and trustingly entered the bridge, not knowing where I would end up. It was simply a bridge--not too narrow, not too high, not terrifying. I crossed my sister's bridge today, and I felt nothing.

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