

The Bridge – R. Henry Price

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Eighty years ago I thought about the future, but only to sixty, the edge of now. Age eighty was a foreign land. But here I was and had to make the best of it. But how? I watched the others in this land, but they were old. They were giving in to old, not that it was a fight; it was a yielding. I needed not to, but I needed to know what it was that I did need. I found the answer as I reclined in a padded chair, my mouth padded with dental detritus. The irony that had always been the lamppost of my life had not abandoned me. I could barely speak, yet it would be words that would connect me to a woman who was what I needed. I would learn that she needed something also, and I might be it.

It started asymmetrically. She knew; I thought maybe. I evolved from maybe to yes. She stayed where she was. At yes.

The connection, the pairing, was asymmetric not only in the speed to seeing. It was asymmetric in so much. But not everything. What counted, what was important, was so much more. I wanted to tell her things; I knew she would understand. She would laugh at what I thought was funny but few others would. It was a banishing – no a fading – of aloneness. We were standing at opposite ends of a bridge, at first shouting to each other. Later whispering, meeting in the middle or visiting the other's side.

It was strange. We both had partners, families, Zorba's full catastrophes. Our bridge did not threaten them. They were from a different part of what life could mean. There was the stability and comfort. The warmth of familiarity, long history, devotion, the unconditionality of kinship. But not the thoughts and feelings that made two people feel like branches of a single tree. Not the thoughts and feelings that made us smile when alone, and for no reason.

The settings on the two sides of the bridge, the beginnings, so different: She had her knuckles rapped by nuns in an emerald land I had only read about. I grew up in the grey land of New York City, thinking it – with some justification – was the center of the world. Until I was nine years old, I thought – with no justification – that everyone was Jewish like me.

We tried to understand, our whatever it was, to put a caption on it like a card under the armadillo display in the zoo telling us of habitat and habits. Early on we crossed out 'fascinated by the difference of our background.'

We took walks. We had picnics. We discussed us. We disagreed about some things but none so much as the why and what of us. The lack of progress and disagreements did not deter us. I wish we had kept records or recordings or had some Boswell who thought us worth preserving. I am certain that the records would show that we completely changed our statements about understanding at least once every two weeks, and often exchanged each other's views.

The roadbed of the bridge was writing. I had been a physicist and was asked for some technical help by a novelist. I read the work of this author and realized – not thought, but knew – that I could do much better. Thus did my career as a novelist begin. I loved being a physicist. But it was time to switch loves. There were signs that I could write, that I loved to write, but I wasn't a sign reader. I should have done it earlier, but I know it's nobody's fault.

Lorna's story was so very different. She loved art, and reading, and the squishy side of the world of phenomena. But she had the flaw of being too good with the hard-edged side of the two cultures. As I was finding myself surrounded by my age peers willing to slide down the hill, she was finding herself facing an emptying nest and thoughts about the path not taken.

She embarrassed me with her praise of my fiction. She did not believe my feelings of inferiority when I read her poetry.

The bridge connected two very different lands, but we both found that we lived in the middle and on each other's side.