

## The Bridge

Charlie Gomulka had become accustomed to the smell of smoke. It was kind of sad, actually, how little the constant aroma of weed and cigarettes bothered him. Watching people smoke pot in Williamsburg didn't arouse any kind of finger-wagging righteousness in him: People smoked with the same sort of nonchalance that they ate their lunch with. The funny thing about drug use was that it didn't really look anything like a big red danger sign his high school health class had described. It was just seeing people doing people things, like anything else. Charlie leaned against the wall, sighed, and inhaled.

People in Williamsburg drifted through life, their feet never really touching the ground. He wasn't even sure whose house party this was, only that he got invited to practically every party regardless of how well he knew anyone.

"You want a drink?" He barely saw the face offering him the metallic red cup. Charlie shook his head, combing one hand through his hair and exhaling. "You sure? You look like you have a stick up your butt." There was something very juvenile about the way she said it, and he realized that she didn't look much older than he was.

"No, really," he said. "I'm just here for my job."

She sniffed. "And what do you do for a living?"

"I pretend to be somebody else."

"Oh, what a pile of hipster horse-shit. Very funny."

"Really." He straightened his back. "I'm an impersonator. A James Dean impersonator."

She looked him up and down with skeptical eyes—he couldn't tell if it was just the absence light in the party, but it seemed like her eyes were a deep, almost black brown. It gave her face a gentle solemnness. "You look nothing like James Dean," she said. "I'm Jules, by the way—I assume I'll just call you James Dean?"

He shrugged. "My name's Charlie, but suit yourself. And pretending to be James Dean is more profitable than you'd think."

The oily frontman of whoever the band playing in the corner was wolf-whistled as he finished his song, a grungy mess of twanging guitar that overpowered any of the voices involved in it. "So, where you from, James Dean?" Jules asked.

"Greenpoint."

"Hey, me too! You Polish?"

"As Polish as they come."

"My last name's Kruczynski. How about you? How hard's it to spell?"

"Gomulka. Not too bad. I think it means cheese."

Julie laughed and in laughing the unidentified alcohol from her cup spurted out of her nose a little. She was wearing a bulky, red pullover sweatshirt and a pair of athletic shorts. She had a loud, almost angry sounding laugh. Charlie tried to find something to look at in the room other than her, but the fact that the partygoers swarmed in an unending sea and there were no windows made it difficult. Smoke blurred the

air. Jules seemed tiny next to him, but most people did given his height of six-foot-six. But she wasn't the pint-sized hip princess Williamsburg seemed to cultivate. She had big arms and big shoulders and her face was dotted with acne. Her golden-blond hair frizzed around her face like a halo.

"Why are you at this party?" He turned to her.

"Because I want to be."

"You seem too..."

"Too what?"

"Too nice for this."

She screwed up her face. "Do you think this isn't for nice people?"

"I mean, I've gone to a lot of them, and no, not really. I just think you seem sweet, and well, not fake."

"If you think you're in a position to judge who's fake and who's real, then I think you need to do some soul-searching." She crossed her arms. "I'm not like some special girl who's different from all the other partying sluts. I'm just hanging out here. It doesn't matter why."

Charlie looked down. "I'm...sorry. Do you like parties?"

"No."

"Then why are you here?"

"Can you get off my back?"

"You talked to me first," he said. "I'm only here to look like James Dean and make people feel like it's the fifties again even though they can't unattach themselves from their iPhones."

"No wonder," she said, giggling. "It's 'detach,' not 'unattach' and you're really a dick."

"What time is it?"

Jules pulled out her phone. "2:30 AM." She fumbled with her purse and produced a pink stick of gum. Charlie couldn't hear her chewing it over the noise of the party but saw her cheeks moving all the same. Somehow that amused him. "Is that real leather?"

He touched his jacket. "This? Probably not."

"You wanna go somewhere else, Charlie?" She tugged on his leather jacket. "Not in like a sexy way, I want to go home and I have to walk over the bridge to where I live and I could use some company."

"I thought you were from Greenpoint."

"Where I'm from, not where I live, stupid. I live on Delancey."

"You oughta take the train."

"Walk over the bridge with me," Jules said. Charlie had never met a girl at a party before, not the way you were supposed to, and he didn't think he was meeting one now. He wouldn't even remember Jules's name in two days. And yet he had the strange desire to walk with her across the Williamsburg Bridge, walk her home to where she lived with her boyfriend or her roommate and see the way her face looked in light that wasn't brown and musty before he forgot about her entirely.

“Okay,” Charlie said. “Let’s clear out.” And so they cleared out, down the stairs to where the party seemed to reverberate through the walls and out of the building until it became nothing but a garble in the distance. The night was blue-black like a dirty bruise and Brooklyn had a yellow glow against it. Down on South Fifth Street the world seemed quiet and unknowable.

Jules folded her arms as they walked. “You cold?” Charlie asked.

“I don’t want your jacket.”

“I’m not offering, I get cold so easy. Sixty is cold for me.”

“Some Pole you are.” They started up the covered staircase and onto the bridge, momentarily cloaked in darkness. Despite what Jules had said, Charlie could see his breath in the air as a tiny white puff.

Charlie had just stepped onto the bridge when the pedestrian walkway rattled and a J train ambled by below them, a silver, glowing streak passing them by in the night. Jules leaned over the railway and stared at it.

“Make a wish,” he said. Jules looked at him quizzically. “I just made that up, it’s dumb, but you know how you see a shooting star and make a wish? See the J, make a wish.”

“I wish it’d come more often,” Jules said, and laughed her hacking laugh.

The East River was vast below the bridge, so full that it almost looked empty, as if the river was made of tar. That bridge seemed impossibly long and in the dark Charlie found its turrets massive and beautiful, not the ungainly fumble of engineering it looked like in daylight. Its blue-white lights shown down on them and illuminated the grey, cold stillness of the air. Ahead of them, Charlie could see the Empire State Building lit up with a thousand tiny bulbs. Pillars of ashen smoke rose from the Lower East Side. Cars blared and sirens wailed on the highway. It was snowing, now.

“Hey,” somebody called out from somewhere on the walkway. Charlie turned, all of the sudden aware of how small and wasted his life was among the lights of the Williamsburg Bridge. “Anybody ever tell you that you look like James Dean?”