Kent Shell Approx. 1,900 words

301 Sterling Place

Brooklyn, NY 11238

(917) 250-2264

shell.author@gmail.com

The Bridge

by Kent Shell

When I first saw the smoke begin to whisper up from under the Audi’s hood I thought I was imagining it. I'd spent three thousand dollars on repairs in the previous few months, the car was supposed to be perfect. It couldn't be smoke. As traffic moved forward in stops and starts, five feet, ten feet at a time, any sign of smoke vanished every time I moved, and every time I stopped it began to seep out again, faint and whitish, like a pope was being announced. An anti-miracle. All of that money I had spent. It was one more thing on top of everything else. The recklessness of my life catching up with me. The Audi, with its beautiful surfaces, was the one place I was supposed to be safe.

It was the hottest part of the afternoon, it had to be close to a hundred degrees. The Manhattan Bridge was practically a parking lot. Inside the air-conditioned car I experienced no alarm or panic, just a slightly quizzical, slightly removed observation as I registered what was happening on the other side of the windshield: Look at that smoke. As if I was pleased to verify that it was real. Another observation was that there was nowhere to pull over. Every cubic inch of space on the bridge was filled with car. Nothing moved. I could see Canal Street a hundred yards away at the end of the bridge. The trickle of smoke continued.

Five minutes, I thought arbitrarily, like assigning a specific number to it could make it so. I’ve got five minutes to get across the bridge before the car bursts into flames, ten minutes tops—I can make it a hundred yards in five minutes. The smoke was coming out faster now, but the car wasn't on fire, not that I could see. Therefore, I concluded, it was safe. I was not going to be the person who left his smoking car on the bridge in the crush of weekend traffic, throwing the entire bridge into gridlock.

I texted Evie a video of the wisps of smoke. “Ho hum, just another day in the life,” I wrote. I was filled with irony and detachment and humor, because as brutal as life had been the past few years—the ongoing financial struggle, the slow and then fast collapse of my marriage, the silences stretching months, and the cold resolution, like half an iceberg giving up and pitching itself into the sea—it was also filled with surprises. Evie was one of them. She had clear gray-green eyes that had shot warm sparks in the light of the bar where we'd had our first date six weeks ago. She was direct and unguarded and funny, and her cheeks turned red with heat when she was laughing or excited or feeling high emotion. When I had moved out three years earlier I didn’t date for a long time, and then when I did I only wanted simple, limited arrangements, but after that night at the bar on Vanderbilt Avenue with Evie I quickly found myself in new territory.

“Oh my god!” she texted back. “Is that … smoke?!”

“Just a little smoke,” I said. "Everything's good!"

“Get out of the car,” she texted. “I’m coming to get you!”

“The traffic’s bumper to bumper,” I said. “You’ll never get here. Really it's fine.”

As I inched forward the ash-colored wisps of smoke became a thin dark curtain that lifted in a continuous line from the edge of the hood. It seemed like a scene from a movie. I tried to picture car explosions I’d seen on TV. I was pretty sure I’d never heard of it happening in real life.

She texted again. “What’s happening? Are you safe yet?”

I thought of my marriage and how I was always trying to keep everything together, like my now-ex-wife and I had both agreed that would be my promise to her. It wouldn’t occur to her to come rescue me if the car was on fire. I would be expected to take care of it. She wouldn’t have wanted to see, or know, and I wouldn’t have wanted her to see or know either. I would feel like it was my problem, probably my fault. I was moved that Evie wanted to help, but I didn’t want her to see me this way—nervous, unsure, trying to be in control of something that was out of control. Besides, there was nothing she could do. The car was—possibly—on fire, or if it wasn’t on fire it was going to be on fire. She was in Brooklyn, I was almost in Manhattan, the tow truck would be here before she’d ever make it, and I could take a cab back after.

Tongues of flame began to lick from under the hood. Small tongues, I reasoned. Other drivers began to look, and to gesture. Trying to regain my irony, I wondered how long you could drive a car with the engine on fire before you had to leave it and run. I know, I nodded back at the other drivers, raising my hands in a shrug and pointing toward Canal Street, now fifty yards away. It’s just a little fire, it’s not going to explode, I said to them in my mind. It was a spectacle, I was a spectacle, but inside the bubble of the Audi I felt safe. Outside the bubble was where chaos was. I turned the air conditioning off so the smoke wouldn’t come in, and left the windows up for the same reason. I turned off the radio because I understood this was no time for entertainment. Inside it got very hot.

The paint on the hood was beginning to blister. The small tongues of flame were getting bigger. From twenty yards the cop directing traffic at the foot of the bridge locked her wide eyes with mine and blew on her whistle and flailed her arms, directing other cars to get away from me and jerking her white-gloved hands in my direction, as if I was a character in a cartoon carrying a lit cartoon bomb. As the cars began to separate and I moved forward, the whistle fell from her mouth. She looked annoyed. Her lips moved. “What are you doing,” she said silently through the windshield, and I shrugged at her and gestured toward the curb where I intended to pull over. As if in response she made grand sweeping gestures to guide me there. The last cars parted and through the smoke I navigated to a patch of broken sidewalk on Canal Street in front of a narrow store window crammed with flipflops and dusty cardboard racks of Tomogotchi, and got out.

I stood on the hot sidewalk in the narrow shade of an awning, watching the billowing black smoke curl off the flames. Everything not made of metal was beginning to melt. Sirens rode up and down in the distance almost peacefully, like they were for someone else, but they were for me. People looked at me and I felt embarrassed to be so obviously the source of such chaos—the poor schnook who stood by helplessly watching his own car burn. After a few minutes of this odd interval firetrucks swept in from each direction and people looked on as men in sweltering black coats and heavy gear jacked open the hood, releasing the flames, which leapt toward the sky. It was spectacular. Big firemen directed great hoses of water into the engine. Coils of smoke and steam boiled skyward in a thick grey column, and in a matter of minutes the fire was extinguished and the Audi was dead.

The firemen barely glanced at me as they picked up their gear. To make sure the Audi stayed dead they left one man there with a hose attached to a fire hydrant, raining a lazy arc down onto the engine, and then he was gone too.

Water lay in thin pools across the narrow sidewalk, already evaporating in the baking heat. I looked back toward the mouth of the bridge, a block away. A progression of steaming, polluting cars slowly poured off it and tilted left onto Canal Street, a river of jostling steel boxes ready to catch fire, heading to the Holland Tunnel. From the slow-moving ribbon of traffic a white car with the windows rolled down peeled away to the right, toward me. Evie’s car. I had told her I thought her road-weary Volvo was cool but she said it was just old. Her air conditioner didn’t work, and I saw her through the open window, her hair pulled up off her neck, her cheeks flushed and shining. She drove the wrong way down the short one-way block the same way I had and left her beat-up sedan angled toward the curb with the door open. She came toward me in a thrift-store sundress and flipflops with her keys in one hand and phone in the other. She threw her arms around me.

Her neck smelled like soap and perspiration. I could tell she had showered. The fine strands that had escaped her hair band were stuck to her skin. “I’m fine,” I said, smiling, embarrassed, trying to convince her it wasn’t a big deal. “It wasn’t a big deal. It was just little flames,” I said, realizing how ridiculous I sounded, “Until they opened the hood. You should have seen it! But really, you didn’t have to come.”

“Your car just burst into a ball of flames with you in it! Of course I came!”

“I guess I knew something like this was going to happen eventually. It’s not like there wasn’t always something going wrong with that car.”

“Something *wrong* with it?—it’s destroyed! Why are you so calm!”

Suddenly I was shivering, even though it was August. I didn’t want her to see. I smiled again in embarrassment.

“I think it’s just that I’m good in a crisis,” I said, which was true. I never liked to think about bad outcomes, as if it invited bad luck. “Anyway—it’s fine now, I’m fine, I didn’t get hurt.”

I felt foolish in front of her for having my car burn up under me. I felt embarrassed to be pretending that it didn’t matter. I felt embarrassed to have such a slipshod life, I felt foolish to be a person whose life was in flames. That she wasn’t leaving no matter how I pretended I wasn’t distressed made me feel like crying. My lower lip started to quiver. I said, “I’m thirsty—are you?” and without waiting for an answer disappeared into a little store to buy two bottles of water. When I came back outside I opened one and handed it to her, and then opened the other. “That was really scary,” I said.

#