

## THE BRIDGE

by John King

### Stranded

Johnny found himself in the darkness all alone somewhere along the interstate highway under an overpass. You know: where a bridge's end meets the embankment, where people hide in a storm, to where lovers sometimes sneak away. But what was Johnny, a seven-year-old, doing here and how did he get here? What kind of ghoul abandons a young child here in the middle of nowhere where no light shines and no one will look for him? Johnny is too afraid to move a step.

He remembered the scolding he got from dad when they were driving along this stretch of road, warning him to quiet down or he would be left behind. He was fighting with his five-year-old brother and things must have gotten out of hand. Harsh discipline is one thing but what parent even imagines such a thing. What childish misbehaving could possibly warrant such extreme measures. Yet, here he was.

Johnny remembered the car screeching to a halt under this bridge and his dad bellowing out that final goodbye, "Get out!!" Johnny only knows, here he is, while a gentle rain is beginning to sound all around him.

### An Interlude

Is this the place to talk about the harm such a thing can inflict on a seven-year old's mind--dropping him off somewhere along a deserted road!? I cannot imagine Johnny's trauma. Is "trauma" the right word to use? (A deeply disturbing experience that emotionally injures.) And how are we to pretend to know how Johnny must feel!? What could he have done that was so terrible that his dad didn't want him anymore? Seven-year-olds can't put words like, "anxious" or "rejected" to an experience. Heck, they only heard ghost stories that defined the word "fear" as a shiver followed by a good laugh. This was none of those words. There were no words ...only a feeling he had never felt before. The closest he came was when the doctor gave him that shot. But that was over in a blink. This, is not that!

Johnny knew that given another chance, he would never again fight with his brother. He would teach his younger sibling all the good things he has learned, teach him to obey mom and dad, teach him to share, to look out the window in silence on long trips. If he got the chance, but now Johnny is doubting that. He is afraid and beginning to feel the cold. He began to cry softly,

just a whimper. It had not occurred to him yet to cry out for help.

### Mom

Johnny's mom loved him, at least he thought so, but, where was she? How could she abandon him in the dark? At home he even slept with a night light on! And this was not his warm bed where under warm covers he could dream of playing the hero for that cute blond classmate in his third-grade class. He was no hero now! He cowered in the corner of the overhang of that expanse as if being held in chains for later by Thunderdell, the hungry giant. (He read the story of Jack and the Beanstalk just the night before--a memory that is now only tormenting a seven-year-old's vivid imagination.)

His mom was always there for him when he cried for her. She gave gentle hugs. She often argued with daddy in his defense. He guessed that his mom probably didn't even know he was missing!

He sat there curled up in the fetal position hoping to feel a little warmer, thinking of his mommy, wishing she could find him. Find him!! Yes, she had to be looking for him! She had to remember the bridge he was left under! Right?

But home had to be a million miles away and it might take her a year to find him! He will get very hungry before then, he thought, like the time he didn't bring his lunch to school and had to wait until he was back home to eat.

### Alley

Johnny was imagining himself at home. He remembered a few times when dad yelled at him because of his frequent fights with his baby brother, Al. Johnny called him Alley--like in *alley cat*--because Alley was always snooping around, everywhere, in his stuff. Alley had his own things but didn't seem to care and mom and dad told Johnny to just let Alley play with his stuff.

*"He won't break them."* They once assured him.

*"But he did; he broke everything!"* Johnny recalled, his teeth clinched, probably more from the cold than any feeling of anger.

(Johnny couldn't know the word that described how he felt. There are about 4,000 words, we are told, to describe "feelings" in English--and a few more in other languages--but these were not part of his vocabulary. So, how could he know?)

It was always his job to clean up after Alley or he was blamed for Alley's messes. He had to be extra quiet when Alley was sleeping. And whenever they fought over anything, it was always Johnny's fault because he was the older brother--a little bit of reasoning or logic that never made any sense to him.

Once, Johnny ran away. But he didn't go far, just next door, hoping his parents would miss him. But they didn't, at least not enough to say they were sorry.

And now it has come to this. Things were so bad, his dad, dropped him off at the nearest culvert on a rainy night in the blackest of the darkest of nights. He could not see his hand in front of him! Johnny found himself, at least in his imagination, in his own ghost story. He felt another shiver vibrate through him--partly from the cold and partly from fright, I think.

Johnny was in every way experiencing something new, something unknown, something horrifyingly different. He would give his favorite firetruck to his brother, just to be home.

### **Bad**

Johnny's fear kicked into a higher gear as he snuggled more tightly into the corner in his hidden world where even a crawling insect now might try to bite him (Something brushed against him in the dark. He felt it touch his leg; so, he drew himself more tightly up into a ball of sorts.) "*I am being punished,*" he sobbed, "*for being bad.*"

"Bad" did he call it!? "Bad" is a childish term when small children don't pick up their toys after mommy says to. "Bad" is pushing your brother over in a fight. Johnny had to be more than "bad" to bring him to this place!

Don't talk about "bad." "Bad" children do not warrant this!! There is no "bad" here. There is only a small child who never heard of such a frightful thing, let alone, experience it. Not even Mr. Rogers mentioned it.

### **And Then**

Johnny thought he heard a car go by. Cars were part of his world. Back home, his bed was next to the window where often a car would go by and he would hear that familiar sound before he dozed off. It was a welcome sound. "*Maybe it was mommy,*" his hope momentarily revived, until the sound faded into the night and only an occasional chirping was heard.

He was so cold and frightened.

### **Grandma**

"*What must it feel like to die?*" He had this horrifying thought. Johnny remembered when Scuffy died, Scuffy was their cat. They called her Scuffy because she clawed at everything and no one could get her to stop. Johnny missed Scuffy. Scuffy died when Johnny was four. His mom tried to explain Scuffy's absence but it is doubtful he understood.

He remembered grandma had died and his mother explained that she went somewhere where they wouldn't see her again for a while. Heaven? Johnny knew of this place because it kept coming up in church. She went somewhere, where we could not go to visit. Maybe he was someplace like that now and no one would be coming to see him, either.

### **Imagination**

Reality at seven is a weak companion often cowering in the corner of a child's vivid imagination. And that is as it should be; for, the imagination provides room for discovery and learning. Besides, what seven-year-old is ready for physics 101?

But somewhere between truth and fairy tales is that foreboding land where a seven-year-old should never go unless accompanied by an adult. Somewhere in the dark where what they see takes on shapes and movement that suggests the unreal, and the surreal. Somewhere where even shadows have personality. It is the land of no light where whatever you imagine comes to life. It is a threatening place where everything bad mommy warned you about can happen.

### **A light**

Suddenly Johnny could discern the soft glimmer of a light in the distance. "*Perhaps, it was a porch light!*" Johnny thought hopefully. Perhaps, someone turned it on because they knew there was a small child out there under that bridge. Johnny's anticipation of someone seeing him there soared. He lifted himself up to get a better look.

"*Perhaps they were coming and they could call my mom to come and get me,*" Johnny sighed with a thought of home in his reasonings.

The light was a steady and constant glow, unmovable and unmoving which is always a good sign. It probably wasn't a speedy motorcycle or something that was going to disappear soon.

He began to cry out now thinking someone would hear him.

"*...before they turn the porch light off and go to bed and forget about me forever,*" Johnny thought anxiously.

He had already discovered that it would be a dangerous thing to go to them. He felt the ground beneath him and his fingers discerned a steep cliff inches from where he sat. He knew that it was not possible to try.

### **Home**

And suddenly there stood his mom in the doorway of his bedroom. (We will let her explain to Johnny and us.)

"Sweetheart, I am so, so sorry for forgetting to turn the nightlight on." His mother confessed that she assumed he was already asleep and tucked in for the night; so, she mistakenly left him in a dark bedroom.

"Honey, did you have a bad dream?" she pre-supposed.

"Mommy," he corrected her. Taking another, deeper, sigh, "I was not sleeping, because I was under that bridge where daddy said he was going to leave me."

"No, sweetheart." Her wisdom, born of a mother's heart, began, while she held him in the gentlest hug, "Your daddy would never do that. He was only angry but he does love you."

"But what about the bugs that crawled on me?" Johnny challenged her.

"No honey, that was your blanket. You must have been shivering." she explained as she began tucking him back in under the warm covers.

"I thought I would fall, mommy!" He gave another sigh.

"You could have fallen off your bed, I suppose." She smiled in agreement. "But now, everything is alright. I'll leave the bathroom light on."

And the calming of a mother's arms returned Johnny to the comfort of good thoughts and the knowledge it was all the result of a maverick imagination.

Johnny fell peacefully back to sleep.