

Between Here and There

It's after midnight, and Connor's mother thinks he's in bed. Instead, he's standing atop the rusty steel truss of an abandoned rail bridge, twelve meters above the churning Ottawa River, vodka-drunk with three other boys who say they're his friends.

Connor believes them, because he's no good at hockey and eats lunch in the guidance counselor's office. Because he's thirteen and can't tell the difference between attention and respect. Because the boys' shoulders and chests and lips make his whole body ache with longing and he knows he will always be alone.

And the boys chant: Jump! Jump! Jump!

As long as he keeps his feet on the bridge, there is time. Two years until his first summer job hawking spark plugs at the Canadian Tire on Carling. Five years until he kisses his mom goodbye and trades his Ottawa bedroom for a top bunk in an overheated Montreal dorm room.

In his first year of university he will make friends, and his friends will take him to gay bars that serve cocktails with homoerotic names he's embarrassed to say out loud. When he gets too drunk they will carry him home and roll him on his side and stay with him until he wakes. They will loan him a copy of *Giovanni's Room*. One night he will stare between his legs in terrified awe at the sight of his cock – *his!* – in the mouth of another man, and he will wonder whether his cock tastes normal, whether he is moaning gratefully enough, whether he will cum too quickly or too slowly or go soft from all the wondering.

In seven years he will fall asleep after a third date in someone else's bed, the muscle and meat of a boy's bare thighs rubbing up against his own in his gin-and-tonic slumber. In the morning he will realize that he has stumbled into something almost resembling love. One year later, he will lose that thing almost resembling love, and he will crash-land into his childhood

bedroom in Ottawa and sob for days.

In ten years he will graduate, then get hired and fired and hired again. He will work at a coffee shop and a summer camp and a sustainable agriculture bookstore in Toronto where strapping lesbians in denim dungarees ask him specific questions about turnips. Eventually he will work in his own office with central air conditioning and framed Cézanne prints on the wall.

He will sweat in a vinyl chair across from a man with wire-framed glasses and a prescription pad, and he will take twenty milligrams a day until color begins to seep back into the gray of the world. He will learn to look at himself shirtless in the mirror without cringing. He will finally tell his father everything he has always thought about him, tell him precisely what kind of man he is, and walk out the front door of his sterile Stratford divorce condo, never to speak to him again.

One night, he will meet a man and invite him home. When they sit down on his bed, Connor will feel a calm he has never known before. Like when the air conditioner ceases its whirr and there's only the silence of a summer night. He will give the man a key to his apartment and introduce him to his mother, who will cook salmon and show him childhood photos of Connor naked in the bathtub. On a sunny May morning in the same church where he tapped his foot impatiently every Sunday morning of his childhood, the man will slide a ring onto his finger.

In twenty years, they will buy a house in the neighborhood where his husband grew up. In the front yard, a beech tree will kneel down and offer its most robust branch for a rope swing. They will sign up with an agency and pore over the profiles of children waiting for families. They will fill out paperwork until three in the morning. In the mirror, Connor will spot gray patches in his stubble.

They will adopt a four year old boy. Connor will snuggle up in bed beside him every night and read him *Caps for Sale* twice, really hamming it up – “You monkeys, you!” – and relishing his boy’s giggles. When the boy falls asleep, he will kiss his bubble bath-fresh forehead. He will think that there is no God if this love is not God. He will pray that his love stays after he is gone, blanketing his boy in its sacred protection, clinging to his every step, every atom.

In forty years, a wispy curtain of hair will newly darken his son’s upper lip. In the boy’s face Connor will see his own as it looked the night he stood on that bridge. Barefoot, shirtless, shivering. Lonely, horny, afraid. Halfway between here and there. How long ago it all was, how far away. A memory from another life, the last vestiges of a nearly-forgotten dream.

All Connor needs to do is keep both his feet on solid ground, and all of this is his.

Jump! the boys chant. Connor’s calves tremble. He draws a breath and holds it. Steps forward and into the air.

In an instant, all those years disappear. There are only seconds left – five, four, three, two, one – and then no time at all.