

Heartbeat

The newlyweds drove around the neighborhood for ten minutes before they found an empty parking space. She assured him that the rental car could squeeze into the spot, and he was pleased with himself as the wheels eased into place. The two lovers walked down a narrow side street and made their way toward the water. As they turned a corner and met the cityscape, she stopped containing her glee. "There's the bridge!" she said to her new husband. The famous Golden Gate Bridge sprawled across the sky like some sort of abstract sunrise, and the newlyweds beheld the sight together.

"Where's the top? The fog is so thick that I can't see the top." He took careful steps on the rocky beach.

"Those are clouds, silly. Fog is on the ground."

"Looks like fog to me."

"Clouds float through the air, up above our heads. Those are clouds. Trust me."

The newlyweds had arrived in San Francisco two days earlier, and they had not yet seen the sun. What was the time of day? Morning? Late afternoon? The sun could have been anywhere in the sky, so the natural world did not offer a clue. She didn't care. This city had been her dream for so many years, and now she could always remember it as her honeymoon

destination. She looked at her husband, a slim fellow shivering along the water's edge, and instinctively smiled.

"So much for sunny California," he said, and kicked a rock.

"The sun is up there. I promise you that." She extended her arms and twirled like a top under the flat grey sky. After three revolutions, she stopped and found him staring at her. "What's wrong?" she asked.

"This is going to be a seriously long hike," he said. "We should head back to the car and try to get closer. I'm guessing that the bridge is three miles away. Maybe four."

"Back to the car? You're talking crazy, sweetheart. We could both use a little exercise, and the weather is pleasant. Okay?" She moved closer to him.

"It's cold," he said. "I like warm weather."

"I know that," she said, putting her arm around his waist, "but if it were hot every day, you would be bored with the warm weather. Summers are more precious because of winters." They walked in the direction of the bridge, and he did not resist. She wondered if she had just won an argument, or if there had been an argument to begin with. The outline of the bridge loomed on the horizon. Her gears turned: "Why do they call it the Golden Gate Bridge? It's not made of gold, obviously enough."

He kept his eyes on the waves in the bay. He began to speak, as if separate from his new wife:

*Nature's first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaf's a flower;
But only so an hour.*

R U B B E R N E C K E R S

*Then leaf subsides to leaf,
So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day.
Nothing gold can stay.*

Her eyes grew wide. "Say it again," she said.

"What?" He laughed out loud.

"That's a Robert Frost poem, right? Say it again for me."

He shook his head. "Honey, that poem is depressing. I don't want to say it again."

"Then why—"

"Gold is the color of beauty, you see, and it fades away. Depressing."

"Nothing is forever," she said, stepping over a rock.

"Nothing but you and me," he said, reaching down to take her hand.

They walked silently now, listening to the soft swirls of the wind and the light shuffles of their footsteps on the shore. Water swept onto the beach and back again, making bubbling sounds. In the distance, barges sleep-walked across the bay to destinations she could not guess. She heard a thumping sound, like a heartbeat. Thump-thump. Thump-thump. Rubber tires rolling across concrete seams, she determined, could produce such a sound. Thump-thump. Would he notice?

They reached the bridge in just under an hour. Orange-red girders clogged the sky, stretching to heaven and elegantly fading into a low bank of clouds. The sight filled her with awe and wonder, but he remained silent.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked.

His answer did not come quickly. "Life," he finally said.

She threw him an innocent glare. "Can you be *less* specific?"

"Nothing, really. All kinds of scattered thoughts."

"Describe one of them," she pressed.

He thought for a second, and then spoke with ominous weight: "Where should we place our priorities?"

"You and me?" she asked.

"Everybody," he said. "People in general. What do you think?"

Her answer was more honest than immediate. "That's a big question. I think it might be too big to answer right now."

He let out a breath just then, and she worried that he had been disappointed by her hesitance. She let her eyes trail along the lone blood vessel on his temple, then squeezed his hand with hopes that she would communicate her unspoken feelings. He squeezed back.

The newlyweds reached the stairs at the foot of the bridge. Hand in hand, they strolled up the cold hard stairs and looked to the pedestrian walkway that loomed above. From time to time they stepped aside for other tourists: an endearing Asian couple who snapped photos at a breakneck pace, an elderly gentleman accompanied by two youngsters who had to be his grandchildren, many others. She took careful notice of the stories behind the eyes of these strangers. Were they happy? Where did they come from, and where would they be tomorrow?

They reached street level. He looked at his watch and nodded. The perpetual streams of traffic rushed past them, adjacent rivers flowing in conflicted directions. The heartbeat had increased its volume and was now accompanied by