

# **The Bridgers**

**By Nicholas Stillman**

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Steve gave up trying to impress the petite woman who took the ferry with him. On the first few commutes from Halifax to Dartmouth, he would take his coat off and stroll around the deck. But she had quickly caught on to those efforts and strolled away herself. A decent physique repelled her. To hell with romance covers—the Little One didn't give a damn about fitness trainers like him. Steve's muscles only displayed a thick work schedule and a thin wallet.

This Monday, this trip, Steve kept his coat on. But he continued to stroll along the deck. The Little One had the right kind of lumps under that stiff black coat of hers. Her straight hair blew in all directions, stirring up the salty air. The ponytail holder barely did its job. It reminded him of a harness on a far away galloping horse. As she walked, Steve's eyes followed, watching that hourglass come to life.

She gripped the handrail as though trying to move that too and watched the MacKay suspension bridge gently sway.

Steve pocketed his hands against the autumn chill. Pacing resumed. He had no chance with the Little One. Every work day, the ferry force-marched them to lousy jobs. It announced the passengers' lowly status as a public bus might. The men here simply rode a bigger, waterborne bus. It ballooned the obvious. The damn boat paraded their strife and slim chances to the whole morning. A month ago when she first boarded, he'd have thought such a blatant commonality with her could draw them closer.

He walked close enough to hear her chatting with the smoke-faces, the ancient elderly who still worked. They had saved up nothing, or they'd at least take cars instead of the damn ferry. All their disposable income probably went toward smokes and similar vices—and the meds to counter the health effects. The old dealt with failure the same as the young do: by daily floggings with toxins.

The Little One laughed and said she'd love to marry a millionaire. Steve knew the joke. And he knew she didn't joke at all.

So like every other workday that started on the ferry, Steve pulled himself away from her. He clamped like a magnet to his regular starboard spot at the handrail, far from the Little One at portside. She had a taunting figure that flowed and moved extra whenever he'd watch. Charging in with one syllable, even a brief "hi," would remind them both of failure to greet earlier. It would burn him every morning until she'd mostly forget about the futile effort.

And he would have to wait months anyway, hoping she would forget the coat incidents. No one strolls on deck coatless in October. It screamed of desperation and daring. Men with money wore their coats all day and had them ironed at night.

Kevin, one of the passengers, took his usual spot too, gripping the handrail beside Steve. The old man had a narrow face but thankfully not a smoke-face. He talked for most of the trip instead of clutching a cigarette to his mouth like the others. They all pinched their little paper penises and

sucked away. Second-hand smoke belched out of cupped right hands and danced to starboard even in the bluster. They'd suck fast every morning before letting the whipping wind out here smoke too much for them.

An ocean for an ashtray reached up with a million waves, encouraging more. Each wave groaned and thrashed, as if requesting filters. The geezers pinged their tiny sponges at the sea, the sparks disappearing before they hit. The gray mop water down there erased all deeds and could always take more.

Steve and Kevin said their good-morning natter after a thorough gaze at the MacKay bridge. The ferry took them near it, though not dangerously so. If the whole thing collapsed, as the experts predicted it soon would, the resulting wave would not capsize even an old vessel such as this. But everyone on board would feel a roller coaster effect and a lightening sensation down to the toes.

Steve believed the seniors on board, even the fitter ones who worked on the ferry, would fall in unison. He pictured many of them rolling like dust bunnies or toppling over the handrail to splash in the rise and fall of the sea. Some would look like chucked dolls. They'd disappear like those cigarette butts, only a little slower.

Yet still, the traffic flowed across the bridge. It sped sped both ways like metal snakes in blind passing. Steve watched the multicolored car chain worming deep through Halifax and Dartmouth sides, around buildings and into morning fog. He saw no hint of the congestion slowing, not one break in the glinting chain. The drivers wanted to pound those four bridge lanes into a strip of sandpaper.

From the bow of the deck, Steve sensed the drivers looking up as all the ferry passengers did each morning. And maybe, with gaping smiles and caffeine-cooked eyes, some drivers might see a strand or two of steel wire snap and untwist a few feet along a suspender cable.