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THE BURNING OF BRIDGES

They left in the night. Glancing cautiously around, they stepped from silent doorways and moved to the meeting places they had memorized. Whispering passwords, they came together in groups of two or three and then, more boldly uniting, they began to move out. In trucks, in cars, even in animal carts they made their way down to the river. Here they left their vehicles and, each man holding on to the arm of the one before, they crossed in the first light of dawn. Then they burnt the bridges.

It is a strange thing, the burning of bridges. The fire rages and a few feet below the water flows by as if nothing were happening. Then, when the flames have done their work, they meet with the water. With a crash they become one in a hissing steam that rises and suffuses the hot air.

In my life I have seen many beautiful things. I have seen trees covered with peach blossoms, and I have seen peach trees against the snow-capped mountains. I have seen children meeting each other for the first time, playing with each other and knowing each other through play and through love. I have seen young men and young women looking at each other with a new love, and I have seen whole peoples rise in one body against their oppressors. All these things in my mind are comparable only to the beauty of burning bridges.

The crowds that gather on each side of a burning bridge seem to be saying goodbye to each other in a peculiarly final way. Then they turn and return to the lives that await them, now on one side only of the river.

When a bridge has been burning all night, the last glow of the flames seems to welcome the rising sun. And when a bridge has been burning all day, its glow lingers on deep into the night.

When I was a child I loved to hear stories. My uncles and my aunts, my grandparents and my parents were all great raconteurs. In the long winter evenings after work was done, or in the soft days of summer as we worked side by side in the fields, they told me of strange deeds done in strange lands. But they never told me the story of the burning of the bridges. It was not until I became a man and saw it for myself that I realized why. And then I understood that the true story of the burning of bridges can never be told.

For those trapped in the middle of a burning bridge, there is little chance of escape. All they can do is leap into the river and hope that the current will bring them to one bank or the other.

Nana is a prostitute. Every day she sells her body to men, very few of whom she finds attractive. She does not like her work particularly, but she earns enough to buy fashionable clothes and to have her hair done once a week. As she sits under the dryer, she reads magazines and all of them seem to be filled with pictures of burning bridges. And when she dreams, or when she day-dreams in isolation as a man she does not know takes his pleasure upon her body, she thinks mostly of burning bridges.

In my mind I have many associations with the burning of bridges. But the one thing I remember most vividly is how the paint on a white cadillac blistered as the bridge around it burned.

The deeper the chasm below, the more spectacular the burning of the bridge. The air rises with great power and thrills the flames into violence.

From my window I could see them. I had been reading all night, and had thought for a long time of a poem about the horn of a white ox. I was glad to have spent the night in solitary and focused contemplation, and it seemed a fitting climax when in the dawn I raised my eyes to the window and saw the bridges burning.

The first time you see a burning bridge, you remember it clearly and in precise detail. And also the second time.

But the third and fourth times and on all subsequent occasions, the event seems to lose its particularity and merge with all the others. It is not until the last time you see a burning bridge that the scene regains the peculiar clarity of the first. You know it, and somehow the fact that you have for the last time witnessed the burning of the bridges gives your life a shape that before it perhaps lacked.

THERE IS EVIDENCE

-- after the Tao of Sex

the woman who meets the standard
is naturally pleasant

her voice is settled &
her silken hair is black she

has delicate skin, slender limbs &
is neither tall nor short the slit

between her thighs is high there
is no hair on her pubic region

her emission
is abundant during intercourse

her body moves and shakes she behaves
in accord with the man

when a woman is moved by a man
there is evidence

-- David James

Venice CA

LISTEN, DOCTOR

Listen, doctor,
all my life
I've had this thing for paper.
Do you think it's serious?
My mouth begins to water