

## Jumper

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One night I drove to Lions Gate Bridge over Burrard Inlet in Vancouver, to research a short story I was writing about a lonely, suicidal widower. I wanted to see what my character would see standing at the railing, late at night, in the middle of the bridge, as he got ready to jump. I got in my car around midnight and drove downtown, through Stanley Park and across the bridge. Just past the bridge, I parked near a small building on the right-hand side of the road and walked back toward the bridge. As I passed the building, I looked in and saw a small office with a woman sitting at a desk. I kept walking.

It only took about five minutes to reach the middle of the bridge. It was a warm night, with a light wind blowing up the inlet from the southeast. Some groups of young people walked by on the other side, heading north toward West Vancouver.

When I got to the middle of the bridge, I stopped. The freshly painted green railing had some graffiti on it. I took out my notebook and wrote it down: "Fragments in time ... still forever." I stood right next to the railing; the top rail came up to my chest. I stood on the lower part of the railing and leaned over the edge. There was no netting or any kind of device to thwart jumpers. When I leaned all the way over, I could see straight down into the black water below. It would be very easy to jump if that's what you wanted to do.

I stepped down from the railing and looked up at the lights. They were mounted on the tops of big lampposts as thick as a man's head. If you stood on the top rail, you could hold onto one to steady yourself.

I was looking out over the water, still facing the railing, when a voice behind me said, "Sir, would you please step away from the railing?"

I turned around. A policeman was walking toward me. Behind him, a police car was parked in the wrong lane, facing south, with a flasher on. Traffic in both directions had stopped.

I was surprised and a little scared. My heart started to pound and my throat went very dry. Police make me nervous at the best of times. This was not the best of times.

The policeman asked me again to step away from the railing. I did so.

"Sir, what are you doing here?" he asked me.

As soon as I spoke I knew my answer would sound absurd. "I'm a writer," I said. "I'm researching a story about a man who jumps off the bridge."

The policeman's expression didn't change. His face hadn't had any expression to begin with. He had light reddish hair and a heavy moustache. A gun hung from his hip. I felt disoriented, almost light-headed, as though I were slightly stoned or moving inside a dream.

For a brief moment I felt that I was my character, that I was in fact not just researching the story but actually living the story. The sensation sent a jolt of fear through my body. I wanted to sit down. I wanted the policeman to go away.

"Sir, I'd like you to get into the car so I can drive you off the bridge," said the policeman.

I nodded and got into the car. The back seat was very cramped. I had to bend my knees sideways to fit. There was a plastic window between the front and back seats, with a sliding door that was open. Through the open space I could see a large computer console mounted

to the right of the steering wheel, with mysterious text and data screens on it.

The policeman got into the front seat, closed the sliding door in the window and drove to the north end of the bridge. He asked me where my car was. I told him.

"When we reach the monitoring station, I'll need to see some ID," he said.

"It's in my jacket in the car," I said, remembering that I hadn't checked my jacket before leaving to make sure my wallet was in the breast pocket. What if I had no ID?

He stopped the car right beside the monitoring station. As soon he opened the car door, I heard a police radio announce my licence number, name and address. I couldn't tell where the radio was. The policeman asked me to wait for a moment.

I sat in the car.

A couple of minutes later, the policeman let me out and followed me over to my car, still parked where I'd left it half an hour earlier. I unlocked the door, got my jacket, extracted my wallet (thank God it was there!) and gave my driver's licence to the policeman.

"Your story sounds plausible," he said. "Are you sure you're all right?"

"Yes," I said. "I'm sorry for the inconvenience."

He gave me back my driver's licence.

"Can I ask you something?" I said. "About the bridge?"

He nodded.

"You have cameras, don't you? All the time."

He nodded again.

There were more questions I wanted to ask but didn't, questions about the bridge, about jumpers, about people who stopped in middle of the bridge and only looked over the railing. How fast could they get there in a police car? Surely not fast enough if you were serious about jumping. You only had to walk to the middle, climb up onto the top of the railing, hold onto the lamppost for support, gather whatever courage remained in your soul and jump down to the dark water below. You could do this in less than a minute.

"Good night," he said.

"Good night," I said. I got in my car and drove home.