

Wipers thrash and a siren wails. From inside the car it sounds strangely muted and I keep looking over my shoulder expecting to see an approaching police car. It takes me a moment to realise that the siren is coming from *our* vehicle.

Masonry towers appear on the skyline. It is Brunel's masterpiece, the Clifton Suspension Bridge, an engineering marvel from the age of steam.

Taillights blaze. Traffic is stretched back more than mile on the approach. Sticking to the apron of the road, we sweep past the stationary cars and pull up at a roadblock where police in fluorescent vests patrol onlookers and unhappy motorists.

The constable opens my door and holds an umbrella above my head. A sheet of rain drives sideways and almost rips it from his hands.

Ahead of me the bridge appears deserted. It is wide enough for only two lanes with pedestrian walkways on either side. I once had a patient, Margaret, who was terrified of crossing bridges. The condition is known as *Gephyrophobia* and she travelled everywhere in London carrying a torpedo-shaped life buoy in case a bridge collapsed, which she was certain it would. This was totally irrational, of course, but simple phobias can be like that.

One of the attributes of bridges is that they offer the possibility that someone may start to cross but never reach the other side. For that person the bridge is virtual; an open window that they can keep passing or climb through.

The Clifton Suspension Bridge has always been popular with jumpers. 'Popular' might not be the best description. Oft-chosen. Well-used. Some say it is actually haunted by past suicides. Shadows have been seen drifting across the vehicle deck that can't be explained.

There are no shadows today. And the ghost I suddenly spot is flesh and blood. A woman, naked, standing outside the safety fence, facing the void with her back pressed to the metal lattice and wire strands. The heels of her red shoes are balancing on the edge.

Like a figure from a surrealist painting, her nakedness isn't particularly shocking yet seems out of place. Standing upright, with a rigid grace, she stares at the water with the demeanour of someone who has detached herself from the world.

I don't like the feel of this. Something isn't right.

The officer in charge introduces himself. A uniform: Sergeant Abernathy. I don't catch his first name. A junior officer holds an umbrella over his head. Water streams off the dark plastic dome, falling on my shoes.

'What do you need?' asks Abernathy.

'A name.'

'We don't have one. She won't talk to us.'

'Has she said anything at all?'

'No. She could be in shock.'

'Where are her clothes?'

'We haven't found them.'

I glance along the pedestrian walkway, which is enclosed by a high fence with five steel wires, making it difficult for anyone to climb over. The rain is so heavy I can barely see the far side of the bridge.

'How long has she been out there?'

'Best part of an hour.'

'Have you found a car?'

'We're still looking.'

She most likely approached from the eastern side which is heavily wooded. Even if she stripped on the walkway dozens of drivers must have seen her. Why didn't anyone stop her?

A large woman with short cropped hair, dyed black, interrupts the meeting. Her shoulders are rounded and her hands bunch in the pockets of

a rain jacket hanging down to her knees. She's huge. Square. And she's wearing men's shoes.

Abernathy stiffens. 'What are you doing here, Ma'am?'

'Just trying to get home, Sergeant. And don't call me, Ma'am. I'm not the bloody Queen.'

She glances at the TV crews and press photographers who have gathered on a grassy ridge, setting up tripods and lights.

Finally she turns to me. 'What are you shaking for, precious? I'm not that scary.'

'I'm sorry. I have a condition.'

'What's that?'

'Parkinson's.'

'Tough break. Does that mean you get a sticker?'

'A sticker?'

'Disabled parking. Let's you park almost anywhere. It's almost as good as being a detective only we get to shoot people and drive fast.'

My God, she's a police officer!

She looks toward the bridge. 'You'll be fine, Doc, don't be nervous.'

'I'm not a doctor, I'm a professor.'

'Really? You ever see Gilligan's Island?'

I hesitate. 'Yes.'

'You think the Professor ever got it on with Ginger? She was cute in a big hair sort of way.'

'I never really - .'

'Don't tell me you fancied Maryanne. Little Miss Pigtails. Tell me - how come the professor could make a working telephone out of a coconut shell but couldn't fix a hole in a boat? It's one of life's great mysteries.'

A two-way radio is being threaded beneath my jacket and a reflective harness loops over my shoulders and clips at the front. The woman detective lights a cigarette, exhaling slowly. She pinches a strand of tobacco from the tip of her tongue, shielding the cigarette from the rain.

Although not in charge, she's a natural leader. The uniformed officers seem more focused and ready to react.

'You want me to go with you?' she asks, motioning with a nod of her head.

'I'll be OK.'

She nods. 'Tell skinny Minnie I'll buy her a low fat muffin if she steps onto our side of the fence.'

'I'll do that.'

Temporary barricades have blocked off both approaches to the bridge, which is deserted except for an ambulance and waiting paramedics. Motorists and spectators have gathered beneath umbrellas and coats. Some have scrambled up a grassy bank to get a better vantage point.

Rain bounces off the tarmac, exploding in miniature mushroom clouds of water, coursing through gutters and pouring off the edges of the bridge in a curtain of water.

The masonry towers support massive sweeping cables that swoop down to the deck and up again. Suspended from it are dozens of vertical cables thicker than my forearms.

As I approach along the walkway, I can see the woman ahead of me. My hands are out of my pockets. My left arm refuses to swing. It does that sometimes - fails to get with the plan.

Water leaks down my back, pooling in the depression above my belt. I move onto the walkway. From a distance her skin had looked flawless, but now I notice that her thighs are criss-crossed with scratches and streaked with mud. Her pubic hair is a dark triangle: darker than her hair, which is woven into a black plait and falls down the nape of her neck.

There is something else - a word written on her stomach in red letters: 'SLUT'.

Why the self-abuse? Why naked? Possibilities fall like dominos in my head, cascading from one tile to the next. This is public humiliation. Perhaps she had an affair and lost someone she loves. She wants to punish

herself to prove she's sorry. Or it could be a threat - the ultimate game of brinkmanship - 'leave me and I'll kill myself.'

No, this is too extreme. Too dangerous. Teenagers sometimes threaten self-harm in failing relationships. It's a sign of emotional immaturity. This woman is in her forties with fleshy thighs and cellulite forming faint depressions on her buttocks and hips. I notice a scar. A caesarean. She's a mother.

I am close to her now. A matter of feet and inches.

She is trying not to look down. Her buttocks and back are pressed hard against the fence. Her left arm is wrapped around an upper strand of wire. The other fist is holding a mobile phone against her ear.

'Hello. My name is Joe. What's yours?'

She doesn't answer. Buffeted by a gust of wind, she seems to lose her balance and rock forwards. The wire is cutting into the crook of her arm. She pulls herself back.

Her lips are moving. She's talking to someone on the phone. I need her attention.

'Just tell me your name. That's not so hard. You can call me Joe and I'll call you...'

Wind pushes hair over her right eye. Only her left is visible, filled with an exhausted terror.

The gnawing uncertainty expands in my stomach. Why the high heels? Has she been to a nightclub? It's too late in the day. Is she drunk? Drugged? Ecstasy can cause psychosis in some people.

I catch snippets of her conversation.

- *'No. No. Please. Take me.'*

'Who's on the phone?' I ask.

- *'I will. I promise. Don't touch her.'*

'Listen to me. You won't want to do this.'

I glance down. More than two hundred feet below a fat-bellied boat nudges against the current, held by its engines. The swollen river claws at the gorse and hawthorn on the lower banks. A dead cow drifts by,

rolling like a barrel. Looking closer I can pick out a confetti of rubbish, swirling on the surface, books, branches, chamber pots and plastic bottles.

'I have a coat. You must be cold. I'll leave it just here and back away. Is that OK?'

Again she doesn't answer. I need her to acknowledge me. A nod of the head or a single word affirmation is enough. I need to know that she's listening.

'Or if you like I could try to put it around your shoulders - just to keep you warm.'

Her head snaps up and she sways forward as if ready to let go. I freeze, still holding the coat.

'I'll stay just here. I won't come any closer.'

Again she mumbles something into the mobile.

'Who are you talking to?'

Ignoring me again, she stares upwards, blinking into the rain. She could just as well be standing in a prison yard, enjoying a brief moment of freedom.

'Whatever's wrong. Whatever has happened to you or has upset you, we can talk about it. I'm not taking the choice away from you. I just want to understand why.'

Her toes are dropping and she has to force herself up onto her heels to keep her balance. Her calves must be in agony. The lactic acid is building in her muscles.

'I have seen people jump, you know. Not from here but from buildings. You shouldn't think it is a painless way of dying. Shall I tell you what happens? It will take you less than three seconds to reach the water. By then you will be travelling at about 75 miles per hour. Your ribs will break and the jagged edges will puncture your internal organs. Sometimes the heart is compressed by the impact and tears away from the aorta so that your chest will fill with blood.'

Her eyes are fixed on mine. I know she's listening.

'Your arms and legs will survive intact but the cervical disks in your neck or the lumbar disks in your spine will most likely rupture. It will not be pretty. It will not be painless. Someone will have to pick you up. Someone will have to identify your body. Someone will be left behind.'

High in the air comes a booming sound. Rolling thunder. The air vibrates and the earth seems to tremble in sympathy or fear. Something is coming.

My eyes return to her.

'You don't understand,' she whispers to me, lowering the phone. For the briefest of moments it dangles at the end of her fingers, as if trying to cling on to her and then tumbles away, disappearing into the void.

The air darkens and a half formed image comes to mind - a gape-mouthed melting figure screaming in despair. Her buttocks are no longer pressing against the metal. Her arm is no longer wrapped around the wire.

She doesn't fight gravity. Arms and legs do not flail or clutch at the air. She's gone. Silently, dropping from view.

Everything seems to stop, as if the world has missed a heartbeat. Paramedics and police officers are dashing past me. People are screaming and crying. I turn away and walk back toward the barricades, wondering if this isn't part of a dream.

They are gazing at where she fell. Asking the same question. Why didn't I save her? Their eyes diminish me. I can't look at them.

My left leg locks and I fall into my puddle. I pick myself up. The ground slides under my feet and I fall again. I wipe the sting from my eyes. Up again, I push through the crowd, ducking beneath a barricade, shouldering people and umbrellas aside.

Stumbling along the side of the road, I splash through puddles and swat away raindrops. Denuded trees reach across the sky, leaning toward me accusingly. Ditches gurgle and foam. The line of vehicles is an unmoving stream. I hear motorists talking to each other.

'Hey, buddy, did she jump?'

'What happened?'

'When are they going to open the road?'

One of them trots beside me. I keep walking, my gaze fixed furiously ahead. He won't let me go. 'Were you on the bridge? What happened.'

Eventually, he drops back. I continue walking, moving in a kind of sleep. My left arm no longer swinging. Blood hums in my ears. Perhaps it was my face that made her do it. The Parkinson's Mask, like cooling bronze. Did she see something or *not* see something?

Lurching toward the gutter, I lean over the safety rail and vomit until my stomach is empty.

*

The man on the bridge is bringing up his lunch. What a strange face he has. White. Frightened. He tried to talk her down but she wasn't listening, not to him anyway. She was listening to me...to my voice.

She looked so helpless as she fell, like a marionette whose strings had been cut. Tumbling over and over, a fallen angel rushing past the trees, which were like a green waterfall behind her.

'Did you see her?'

'I saw her.'

'She wasn't the one.'

'No.'

The chair groans under my weight and I peer through the telescope. People are swarming across the bridge like insects. How small they seem. How distant.

'You said this time.'

'Not this time.'

'I liked her.'

'I will find you another one.'

*The brass telescope swings through full circle, spinning on its tripod.
I catch it in my right fist as my left hand burrows into my trouser pocket.*

'Do you want to see it again?'

'Not yet.'

'Shall I turn off the camera?'

'Yes.'

The turret room is part of a Georgian terrace. Long ago painted different colours, the layers have been worn off by the wind and rain. It stands on the edge of the ridge, high above the river where trees soften its outline. A balcony faces the gorge. Below the balcony is a porch and at the centre of the porch is a door with broad panels of glass and a brass knocker.

Now it is a guesthouse. Rooms are rented by the week or month.

Pushing the telescope away, I let it spin full circle and stand, pressing my forehead to the rain-streaked glass. The wind moans through the trees and rattles the pane.

I wonder who he is – the man on the bridge who tried to speak to her? He came with the pale skinned officer and walked with a strange limp, one arm swinging, sawing at the air, the other by his side. A negotiator perhaps. A psychologist. Not a lover of heights.

He reeled away and stumbled when she fell. One moment he was upright and the next he had crumpled sideways, all limbs and ligaments, as though his legs had gone to water

'Did you see her?'

'I told you I did.'

'You almost left it too late.'

'No.'

'The next one is mine. Promise me.'

'I promise.'

She looked so beautiful when she fell. A dove with a broken wing is still a dove. I will sleep tonight. They will not be laughing. I have silenced the whores.