

LETTER FROM CALIFORNIA

JUMPERS

The fatal grandeur of the Golden Gate Bridge.

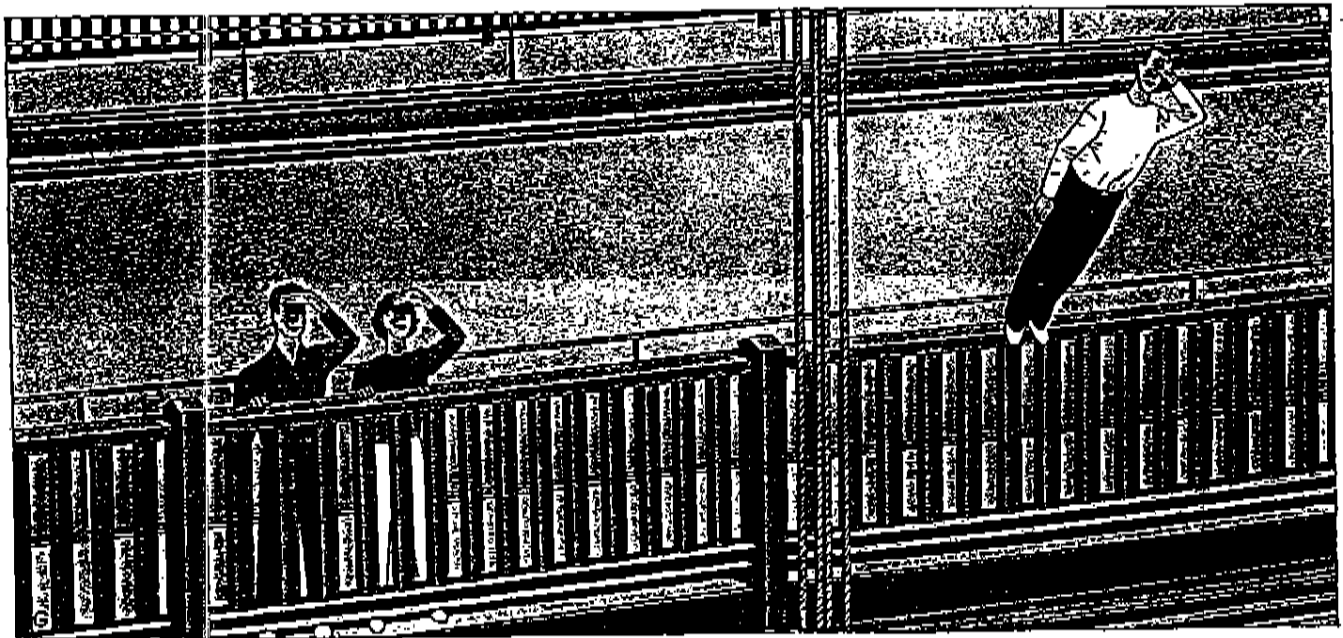
BY TAD FRIEND

Shortly after ten-thirty in the morning on Wednesday, March 19th, a real-estate agent named Paul Alarab began hiking across the Golden Gate Bridge. Midway along the walkway, which carries pedestrians and cyclists between San Francisco and Marin County, he stopped and climbed the four-foot safety railing. Then he lowered himself

with a "Peace" T-shirt underneath, but today he wore black gloves, black shoes, black pants, a black T-shirt, and black sunglasses. Through the palings of the bridge rail and the rush of traffic, he could see the mouth of the Bay to the west and the Pacific beyond. Clasp ing a typed statement to his chest with his left hand, he leaned backward, away from

told them that he wanted to speak to the media. As it happened, a number of TV crews were at the south end of the bridge, filming standups about heightened terrorism precautions. A Telemundo crew came out, and Alarab began to read a declaration about Iraq's defenseless women, children, and elderly. "Wake up, America!" he said. "This war will be known as 'the war of cowards and oil' across the world!"

As a Coast Guard cutter idled in the fifty-five-degree water below, the bridge's guardians tried to talk Alarab into coming up. "When CNN gets here, I'm back over the other side of the railing," he promised. One Highway Patrol officer said, "Hey, don't I know you?" Alarab squinted, and said, "Oh, sure!"



"I wanted to disappear," one man said. "So the Golden Gate was the spot. I'd heard that the water just sweeps you under."

carefully onto the bridge's outermost reach, a thirty-two-inch-wide beam known as "the chord." It is on the chord, two hundred and twenty feet above San Francisco Bay, that people intending to kill themselves often pause. On a sunny day, as this day was, the view is glorious: Angel Island to the left, Alcatraz straight ahead, Treasure Island farther off, bisecting the long gray tangent of the Bay Bridge, and, layered across the hills to the south, San Francisco.

Alarab turned and looped a thick rope over the railing, then wound it around his right wrist five times and grabbed it with his gloved right hand. His weekday attire usually consisted of a business suit

the railing, and waited for help to arrive.

Alarab, a forty-four-year-old Iraqi-American, was a large, balding, friendly man who kept a "No Hate" sign in his office at Century 21 Heritage Real Estate in Lafayette, across the Bay. The day before, he'd told a co-worker that the prospect of civilian deaths in Iraq made him sick to his stomach. Alarab had chosen this day, the first of America's war against Saddam Hussein, to make a statement of opposition.

Responding to a "10-31," bridge code for a jumper, four uniformed California Highway Patrol officers soon arrived at the rail, joined by three ironworkers who had been repairing the bridge. Alarab

They had met during Alarab's previous adventure on the bridge: in 1988, seeking to publicize the plight of the handicapped and the elderly, Alarab had climbed down a sixty-foot nylon cord into a large plastic garbage can he'd suspended beneath the bridge. His weight proved too much for the apparatus, and the can broke free with him inside. "It seemed like the fall lasted forever," Alarab said afterward. "I was praying for God to give me another chance." The fall broke both of Alarab's ankles and three of his ribs and collapsed his lungs, but he lived—becoming one of only twenty-six people to survive the plunge from the Golden Gate. "I'll never put my life

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on the line again," he said at the time.

Survivors often regret their decision in midair, if not before. Ken Baldwin and Kevin Hines both say they hurdled over the railing, afraid that if they stood on the chord they might lose their courage. Baldwin was twenty-eight and severely depressed on the August day in 1985 when he told his wife not to expect him home till late. "I wanted to disappear," he said. "So the Golden Gate was *the* spot. I'd heard that the water just sweeps you under." On the bridge, Baldwin counted to ten and stayed frozen. He counted to ten again, then vaulted over. "I still see my hands coming off the railing," he said. As he crossed the chord in flight, Baldwin recalls, "I instantly realized that everything in my life that I'd thought was unfixable was totally fixable—except for having just jumped."

Kevin Hines was eighteen when he took a municipal bus to the bridge one day in September, 2000. After treating himself to a last meal of Starbursts and Skittles, he paced back and forth and sobbed on the bridge walkway for half an hour. No one asked him what was wrong. A beautiful German tourist approached, handed him her camera, and asked him to take her picture, which he did. "I was like, 'Fuck this, nobody cares,'" he told me. "So I jumped." But after he crossed the chord, he recalls, "My first thought was What the hell did I just do? I don't want to die."

Paul Alarab never told his colleagues about his first experience on the bridge. He didn't even tell his wife, whom he married in 1990 and divorced in 1995. The only hint of his fascination was his business card, which he resisted changing despite his boss's complaint that it looked unprofessional. The card featured a photo of Alarab on the shore of the Bay; behind him lurked the Golden Gate.

On that March morning, facing the camera, Alarab read an ambiguous handwritten addendum to his statement: "I would sacrifice myself as a symbol of children that will die. If you are antiwar, e-mail me at alarabpaul@hotmail.com." After forty minutes, CNN had not arrived and it seemed that Alarab had done all he could. It was 11:33 A.M. He bent to put his statement on the bridge, then placed his cell phone on it. He then unwound his wrist from the securing

rope and stepped off the chord. The officers on the walkway craned their necks in a horrified line, watching him fall.

At a 1977 rally on the Golden Gate supporting the building of an anti-suicide barrier above the railing, a minister, speaking to six hundred of his followers, tried to explain the bridge's power. Matchless in its Art Deco splendor, the Golden Gate is also unrivalled as a symbol: it is a threshold that presides over the end of the continent and a gangway to the void beyond. Just being there, the minister said, his words growing increasingly incoherent, left him in a rather suicidal mood. The Golden Gate, he said, is "a symbol of human ingenuity, technological genius, but social failure."

Eighteen months later, that minister, the Reverend Jim Jones, who had decamped with his People's Temple to Jonestown, Guyana, ordered his adherents to kill themselves by drinking grape Kool-Aid mixed with potassium cyanide. Nine hundred and twelve of them did.

Every two weeks, on average, someone jumps off the Golden Gate Bridge. It is the world's leading suicide location. In the eighties, workers at a local lumberyard formed "the Golden Gate Leapers Association"—a sports pool in which bets were placed on which day of the week someone would jump. At least twelve hundred people have been seen jumping or have been found in the water since the bridge opened, in 1937, including Roy Raymond, the founder of Victoria's Secret, in 1993, and Duane Garrett, a Democratic fund-raiser and a friend of Al Gore's, in 1995. The actual toll is probably considerably higher, swelled by legions of the stealthy, who sneak onto the bridge after the walkway closes at sundown and are carried to sea with the neap tide. Many jumpers wrap suicide notes in plastic and tuck them into their pockets. "Survival of the fittest. Adios—unfit," one seventy-year-old man said in his valedictory; another wrote, "Absolutely no reason except I have a toothache."

There is a fatal grandeur to the place. Like Paul Alarab, who lived and worked in the East Bay, several people have crossed the Bay Bridge to jump from the Golden Gate; there is no record of anyone traversing the Golden Gate to leap from its unlovely sister bridge. Dr. Richard Seiden, a professor emeritus at

the University of California at Berkeley's School of Public Health and the leading researcher on suicide at the bridge, has written that studies reveal "a commonly held attitude that romanticizes suicide from the Golden Gate Bridge in such terms as aesthetically pleasing and beautiful, while regarding a Bay Bridge suicide as tacky."

Unlike the Bay Bridge—or most bridges, for that matter—the Golden Gate has a footpath adjacent to a low exterior railing. "Jumping from the bridge is seen as sure, quick, clean, and available—which is the most potent factor," Dr. Jerome Motto, a local psychiatrist and suicide expert, says. "It's like having a loaded gun on your kitchen table."

Almost everyone in the Bay Area knows someone who has jumped, and it is perhaps not surprising that the most common fear among San Franciscans is gephyrophobia, the fear of crossing bridges. Yet the locals take a peculiar pride in the bridge's notoriety. "What makes the bridge so popular," Gladys Hansen, the city's unofficial historian, says, citing the ten million tourists who visit the bridge each year, "is that it's a monument, a monument to death." In 1993, a man named Steve Page threw his three-year-old daughter, Kellie, over the side of the bridge and followed her down; even after this widely publicized atrocity, an *Examiner* poll that year found that fifty-four per cent of the respondents opposed building a suicide barrier.

The idea of building a barrier was first proposed in the nineteen-fifties, and it has provoked controversy ever since. "The battle over a barrier is actually a battle of ideas," Eve Meyer, the executive director of San Francisco Suicide Prevention, told me. "And some of the ideas are very old, ideas about whether suicidal people are people to fear and hate." In centuries past, suicides were buried at night at a crossroads, under piles of stones, or had stakes driven through their hearts to prevent their unquiet spirits from troubling the rest of us. In the United States today, someone takes his own life every eighteen minutes, and suicide is much more common than homicide. Still, the issue is rarely examined. In the Bay Area, the topic is virtually taboo. One Golden Gate official told me repeatedly, "I hate that you're writing about this."

In 1976, an engineer named Roger

Grimes began agitating for a barrier on the Golden Gate. He walked up and down the bridge wearing a sandwich board that said "Please Care. Support a Suicide Barrier." He gave up a few years ago, stunned that in an area as famously liberal as San Francisco, where you can always find a constituency for the view that pets should be citizens or that poison oak has a right to exist, there was so little empathy for the depressed. "People were very hostile," Grimes told me. "They would throw soda cans at me, or yell, 'Jump!'"

When Paul Alarab was pulled from the Bay at 11:34 A.M., he was unconscious and badly bruised. The impact had ripped off his left glove and his right shoe. The Coast Guard crew, wearing their standard jumper-retrieval garb to protect against leaking body fluids—Tyvex biohazard suits, masks, gloves, and safety goggles—began C.P.R. Half an hour later, Alarab was pronounced dead. Gary Tindel, the assistant coroner of Marin County, who examined the body on the dock at Fort Baker, at the north end of the bridge, observed that "massive bleeding had occurred in both ears, along with apparent grayish brain matter in and around the right ear." Tindel brought Alarab's antiwar statement and his cell phone back to the coroner's office in San Rafael. Soon afterward, the cell phone rang. It was Alarab's ex-wife, Rubina Coton: their nine-year-old son had been waiting more than two hours at school for his father to pick him up.

"May I speak with Paul?" Coton asked.

"I'm sorry," Tindel said. "You can't." Tindel explained that he was with the coroner's office and suggested that Coton call back on his office phone. When she did, he told her that her ex-husband had jumped off the Golden Gate Bridge.

"Please don't joke," Coton said.

Tindel described Alarab's outfit, but Coton didn't recognize the clothes. Then he told her that the corpse wore a yarn necklace. And she recalled, suddenly, that their daughter had made such a necklace for Paul.

Jumpers tend to idealize what will happen after they step off the bridge. "Suicidal people have transformation fantasies and are prone to magical thinking, like children and psychotics," Dr. Lanny

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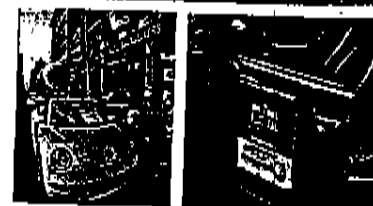
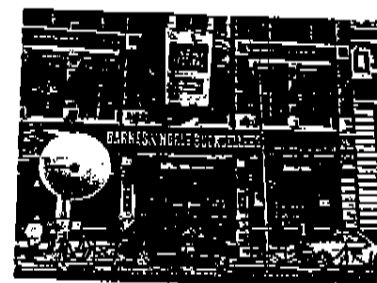
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Berman, the executive director of the American Association of Suicidology, says. "Jumpers are drawn to the Golden Gate because they believe it's a gateway to another place. They think that life will slow down in those final seconds, and then they'll hit the water cleanly, like a high diver."

In the four-second fall from the bridge, survivors say, time does seem to slow. On her way down in 1979, Ann McGuire said to herself, "I must be about to hit," three times. But the impact is not clean: the coroner's usual verdict, suicide caused by "multiple blunt-force injuries," euphemizes the devastation. Many people don't look down first, and so those who jump from the north end of the bridge hit the land instead of the water they saw further out. Jumpers who hit the water do so at about seventy-five miles an hour and with a force of fifteen thousand pounds per square inch. Eighty-five per cent of them suffer broken ribs, which rip inward and tear through the spleen, the lungs, and the heart. Vertebrae snap, and the liver often ruptures. "It's as if someone took an eggbeater to the organs of the body and ground everything up," Ron Wilton, a Coast Guard officer, once observed.

Those who survive the impact usually die soon afterward. If they go straight in, they plunge so deeply into the water—which reaches a depth of three hundred and fifty feet—that they drown. (The rare survivors always hit feet first, and at a slight angle.) A number of bodies become trapped in the eddies stirred by the bridge's massive stone piers, and sometimes wash up as far away as the Farallon Islands, about thirty miles off. These corpses suffer from "severe marine depredation"—shark attacks and, particularly, the attentions of crabs, which feed on the eyeballs first, then the loose flesh of the cheeks. Already this year, two bodies have vanished entirely.

On December 17, 2001, fourteen-year-old Marissa Imrie, a petite and attractive straight-A student who had planned to become a psychiatrist, left her second-period class at Santa Rosa High School, took a hundred-and-fifty-dollar taxi ride to the Golden Gate, and jumped to her death. Though Marissa was always very hard on herself and had lately complained of severe

RAPUNZEL: STARBUCKS

Acquaintance's
acquaintance.

Once: young, tousled
blonde at a window.

Divorced, I heard.

Ex's third:
half her age.

First: an actual princess.

Any contract's:
cash, clout, position.

Shrink, M.D.—
grown kids, clients.

No ring—
coffee, a sandwich.

Giggles, like a girl,
at the register.

"I can't add."

Bites cake; flips
a psych journal.

Sudden ravaged face—
with normalcy.

Almost notices me.

—Hugh Seidman

headaches and insomnia, her mother, Renée Milligan, had no inkling of her plans. "She called us 'the glue girls,' we were so close," Milligan told me. "She'd never spoken about the bridge, and we'd never even visited it."

When Milligan examined her daughter's computer afterward, she discovered that Marissa had been visiting a how-to Web site about suicide that featured grisly autopsy photos. The site notes that many suicide methods are ineffective (poison is fatal only fifteen per cent of the time, drug overdose twelve per cent, and wrist cutting a mere five per cent) and therefore recommends bridges, noting that "jumps from higher than . . . 250 feet over water are almost always fatal." Milligan bought the proprietor of the site's book, "Suicide and Attempted Suicide," and read the following sentence: "The Golden Gate Bridge is to suicides what Niagara Falls is to honeymooners." She returned the book and gave the computer away.

Every year, Marissa had written her mother a Christmas letter reflecting on the year's events. On Christmas Day that year, Milligan, going through her daughter's things, found her suicide note. It was tucked into "The Chronicles of Narnia," which sat beside a copy of "Seven Habits of Highly Effective Teenagers." The note ended with a plea: "Please forgive me. Don't shut yourselves

off from the world. Everyone is better off without this fat, disgusting, boring girl. Move on."

Renée Milligan could not. "When I went to my optometrist, I realized he has big pictures of the Golden Gate in his office, and I had to walk out," she said. "The image of the bridge is everywhere. San Francisco is the Golden Gate Bridge—I can't escape it." Milligan recently filed a wrongful-death lawsuit on behalf of her daughter's estate against the Golden Gate Bridge District and the bridge's board of directors, seeking to require them to put up a barrier. Her suit charges, "Through their acts and omissions Defendants have authorized, encouraged, and condoned government-assisted suicide." Three previous lawsuits against the bridge by the parents of suicides have all been dismissed, and the bridge officials' reply to Milligan's suit lays out their standard defense: "Plaintiffs' injuries, if any, were the result of Plaintiffs' own actions (contributory negligence)." Furthermore, the reply says, "plaintiffs cannot show that Ms. Imrie used the property with due care for the purposes it was designed."

As Joseph Strauss, the chief engineer of the Golden Gate, watched his beloved suspension bridge rise over San Francisco Bay in the nineteen-thirties, he could not imagine that anyone would

use it without due care for its designated purpose. "Who would want to jump from the Golden Gate Bridge?" he told reporters. At the bridge's opening ceremony, in May of 1937, Strauss read a statement in a low voice, his hands trembling. "What Nature rent asunder long ago man has joined today," he said. The class poet at Ohio University, class of '91, Strauss also wrote an ode to mark the occasion:

As harps for the winds of heaven,
My web-like cables are spun;
I offer my span for the traffic of man,
At the gate of the setting sun.

Three months later, a forty-seven-year-old First World War veteran named Harold Wobber turned to a stranger on the walkway, announced, "This is as far as I go," and hopped over the rail. His body was never found. The original design called for the rail to be five and a half feet high, but this was lowered to four feet in the final blueprint, for reasons that are lost to history. The bridge's chief engineer, Mervin Giacomini, who recently retired, told me half seriously that Strauss's stature—he was only five feet

tall—may have been a factor in the decision. Known as "the little man who built the big bridge," Strauss may simply have wanted to be able to see over its side.

In May, 1938, Strauss died of a heart attack, likely brought on by the stress of seeing the bridge to completion. A plaque dedicated to him at the southern end of the bridge a few months later declared the span "a promise indeed that the race of man shall endure unto the ages"; at that point, six people had already jumped off. And at the dedication ceremony A. R. O'Brien, the bridge's director, delivered a notably dark eulogy. Strauss "put everything he had" into the bridge's construction, O'Brien said, "and out of its completion he got so little. . . . The Golden Gate Bridge, for my dead friend, turned out to be a mute monument of misery."

In the years since the bridge's dedication, Harold Wobber's flight path has become well worn. I spent a day reading through clippings about Golden Gate Bridge suicides in the San Francisco Public Library, hundreds of two- or three-inch tales of woe from the *Chron-*

icle, the *Examiner*, the *Call-Bulletin*: "police said he was despondent over domestic affairs"; "medical discharge from the army"; "jobless butcher"; "the upholstery still retaining the warmth of the driver's body"; "saying 'good-bye' four times and looking 'very sad'"; "sick at heart" over the treatment of Jewish relatives in Germany"; "the baby's cries apparently irritated him past endurance"; "footprints on the fog-wet girders were found early today"; "using his last nickel to scratch a farewell on the guard railing."

The coverage intensified in 1973, when the *Chronicle* and the *Examiner* initiated countdowns to the five-hundredth recorded jumper. Bridge officials turned back fourteen aspirants to the title, including one man who had "500" chalked on a cardboard sign pinned to his T-shirt. The eventual "winner," who eluded both bridge personnel and local-television crews, was a commune-dweller tripping on LSD.

In 1995, as No. 1,000 approached, the frenzy was even greater. A local disk jockey went so far as to promise a case of Snapple to the family of the victim. That June, trying to stop the countdown fever, the California Highway Patrol halted its official count at 997. In early July, Eric Atkinson, age twenty-five, became the unofficial thousandth; he was seen jumping, but his body was never found.

Ken Holmes, the Marin County coroner, told me, "When the number got to around eight hundred and fifty, we went to the local papers and said, 'You've got to stop reporting numbers.'" Within the last decade, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the American Association of Suicidology have also issued guidelines urging the media to downplay the suicides. The Bay Area media now usually report bridge jumps only if they involve a celebrity or tie up traffic. "We weaned them," Holmes said. But, he added, "the lack of publicity hasn't reduced the number of suicides at all."

The Empire State Building, the Duomo, St. Peter's Basilica, and Sydney Harbor Bridge were all suicide magnets before barriers were erected on them. So were Mt. Mihara, a volcano in Japan (more than six hundred people jumped into it in 1936 alone); the Arroyo Seco Bridge, in Pasadena; and the Eiffel



"I'll give you a few moments to recover from the prices."

MARISA
ACCELLA

"Do you have a phone that doesn't do too much?"

Tower. At Prince Edward Viaduct, in Toronto, the site of nearly five hundred fatal jumps, engineers just finished constructing a four-million-dollar "luminous veil" of stainless-steel rods above the railing. At all of these places, after the barriers were in place the number of jumpers declined to a handful, or to zero.

"In the seventies, we were really mobilized for a barrier at the Golden Gate," Dr. Richard Seiden, the Berkeley suicide expert, told me. In 1970, the board of the Golden Gate Bridge Highway and Transportation District began study-

ing eighteen suicide-barrier proposals, including a nine-foot wire fence, a nylon safety net, and even high-voltage laser beams. The board's criteria were cost, aesthetics, and effectiveness. In 1973, the nineteen-member board, most of them political appointees, declared that none of the options were "acceptable to the public." (The laser-beam proposal was vetoed because of the likelihood of "severe burns, possibly fatal, to pedestrians and personnel.")

In 1998, a company called Z-Clip suggested that one of its livestock fences serve as a barrier. The seven-foot-tall

mesh of wires had originally been used in Chile to keep cattle out of pine-seedling plantations, and would cost a mere \$2.3 million to \$3.5 million. The bridge board would not approve it, however. Barbara Kaufman, a board member, said that the fence resembled the "barbed wire at concentration camps."

Tom Ammiano, a leading candidate for the mayoralty of San Francisco this fall, is among the bridge's most liberal supervisors. He says that a barrier is no longer being actively considered, and that only he and three or four other board members favor one. "There's a lot of white Republicans on the board who resist change," Ammiano told me. He laughed darkly, and added, "The Golden Gate is an icon, my dear."

The most plausible reason for the board's resistance is aesthetics. For the past twenty-five years, however, three hundred and fifty feet of the southern end of the bridge have been festooned with an eight-foot-tall cyclone fence, directly above the Fort Point National Park site on the shore of the Bay. This "debris fence" was erected to keep tourists from dropping things—including, at one point, bowling balls—on other tourists below. "It's a public-safety issue," the bridge's former chief engineer, Mervin Giacomini, told me.

Another factor is cost, which would seem particularly important now that the Bridge District has a projected five-year shortfall of more than two hundred million dollars. Yet, in October, construction will be completed on a fifty-four-inch-high steel barrier between the walkway and the adjacent traffic lanes which is meant to prevent bicyclists from veering into traffic. No cyclist has ever been killed; nonetheless, the bridge's chief engineer, Denis Mulligan, says that the five-million-dollar barrier was necessary: "It's a public-safety issue." Engineers are also considering erecting a movable median to prevent head-on collisions, at a cost of at least twenty million dollars. "It's a public-safety issue," Al Boro, a member of the Bridge District's board of directors, said to me.

A familiar argument against a barrier is that thwarted jumpers will simply go elsewhere. In 1953, a bridge supervisor named Mervin Lewis rejected

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an early proposal for a barrier by saying it was preferable that suicides jump into the Bay than dive off a building "and maybe kill somebody else." (It's a public-safety issue.) Although this belief makes intuitive sense, it is demonstrably untrue. Dr. Seiden's study, "Where Are They Now?," published in 1978, followed up on five hundred and fifteen people who were prevented from attempting suicide at the bridge between 1937 and 1971. After, on average, more than twenty-six years, ninety-four per cent of the would-be suicides were either still alive or had died of natural causes. "The findings confirm previous observations that suicidal behavior is crisis-oriented and acute in nature," Seiden concluded; if you can get a suicidal person through his crisis—Seiden put the high-risk period at ninety days—chances are extremely good that he won't kill himself later.

The current system for preventing suicide on the bridge is what officials call "the non-physical barrier." Its components include numerous security cameras and thirteen telephones, which potential suicides or alarmed passersby can use to reach the bridge's control tower. The most important element is randomly scheduled patrols by California Highway patrolmen and Golden Gate Bridge personnel in squad cars and on foot, bicycle, and motorcycle.

In two visits to the bridge, I spent an hour and a half on the walkway and never saw a patrolman. Perhaps, on camera, I didn't exhibit troubling behavior. The monitors look for people standing alone near the railing, and pay particular attention if they've left a backpack, a briefcase, or a wallet on the ground beside them. Kevin Briggs, a friendly, sandy-haired motorcycle patrolman, has a knack for spotting jumpers and talking them back from the edge; he has coaxed in more than two hundred potential jumpers without losing one over the side. He won the Highway Patrol's Marin County Uniformed Employee of the Year Award last year. Briggs told me that he starts talking to a potential jumper by asking, "How are you feeling today?" Then, "What's your plan for to-

morrow?" If the person doesn't have a plan, Briggs says, "Well, let's make one. If it doesn't work out, you can always come back here later."

The non-physical barrier catches between fifty and eighty people each year, and misses about thirty. Responding to these figures, Al Boro said, "I think that's positive, I think that's effective. Of course, you'd like to do everything you can to make it zero, within reason."

Despite the coroner's verdict, Paul Alarab's loved ones insist that he didn't jump off the Golden Gate. Having viewed the Telemundo tape, they believe that when Alarab was putting down his antiwar statement he slipped and fell. An accident is easier for friends and family to accept, whereas suicide leaves behind nothing but guilt. It's impossible to know whether any one suicide might have been prevented, but many suicidal people do indeed wish to be saved. As the eminent suicidologist E. S. Shneidman has said, "The paradigm is the man who cuts his throat and cries for help in the same breath."

Those who work on the bridge learn to cope with the suicides they can't prevent by keeping an emotional distance. Glen Sievert, an ironworker who has often helped rescue potential jumpers, told the *Wall Street Journal*, "I don't like these people. I have my own problems." Even Kevin Briggs, the empathic patrolman, was surprised to learn, when he and some colleagues had a week's training with a psychiatrist earlier this year, that suicidal people "are real people—not crazy people but real people suffering from depression." Nonetheless, Briggs remains opposed to a barrier. "The bridge is about beauty," he told me. "They're going to jump anyway, and you can't stop them."



Mary Currie, the bridge's spokeswoman, is an intense woman with short dark-blond hair. Last February, she went on a foot patrol with five Golden Gate patrolmen so that she would understand that detail better. Currie told me that her group stopped to assess a handsome middle-aged man who'd been at the south tower for two hours. "He said he was just taking a walk. But we all had a feeling," Currie said. "Still, you can't gang-tackle a guy for

taking a walk. Five minutes after our last contact with him, he walked to the mid-span and looked back. We all took off after him; I was only twenty feet away when he went over. We saw him go in, feet first.

"The other guys felt they'd followed procedure, done what they had to do, didn't get him, and they've moved on. But I had nightmares for a week. Should I have grabbed his ankles? Should there be a barrier? I finally decided it was this guy's choice. I have depression in my family—I've had some myself—and you just have to fight it." After a second, she reversed herself. "You know, if my mother had succeeded in killing herself—and she tried—I would be much more devastated, and my thinking would be..." She shook her head, banishing doubt. "That bridge is more than a bridge: it's alive, it speaks to people. Some people come here, find themselves, and leave; some come here, find themselves, and jump."

The bridge comes into the lives of all Bay Area residents sooner or later, and it often stays. Dr. Jerome Motto, who has been part of two failed suicide-barrier coalitions, is now retired and living in San Mateo. When I visited him there, we spent three hours talking about the bridge. Motto had a patient who committed suicide from the Golden Gate in 1963, but the jump that affected him most occurred in the seventies. "I went to this guy's apartment afterward with the assistant medical examiner," he told me. "The guy was in his thirties, lived alone, pretty bare apartment. He'd written a note and left it on his bureau. It said, 'I'm going to walk to the bridge. If one person smiles at me on the way, I will not jump.'"

Motto sat back in his chair. "That was it," he said. "It's so needless, the number of people who are lost."

As people who work on the bridge know, smiles and gentle words don't always prevent suicide. A barrier would. But to build one would be to acknowledge that we do not understand each other; to acknowledge that much of life is lived on the chord, on the far side of the railing. Joseph Strauss believed that the Golden Gate would demonstrate man's control over nature, and so it did. No engineer, however, has discovered a way to control the wildness within. ♦

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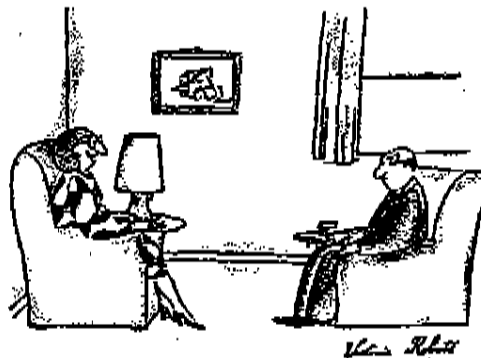
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