

I Didn't Know How to Catch You

She thought about jumping. Every time she crossed the Astoria-Megler Bridge she thought about it. The bridge was narrow and high, just high enough that the impact might save her from drowning in the Pacific water. At least that's how she imagined it. Lately, Joanie spent lots of time imagining it. She stood three-quarters of the way across the bridge, staring blandly into the empty space below her. She could do it right now. It would be so easy. She had never realized how many times a day someone had the chance to take their life. Even standing on the shoulder of the road, next to the two lanes of traffic, she was a step away from death.

When her yellow Geo had been repossessed, the forty-five minute drive to Astoria, Oregon from the Long Beach Peninsula in Washington had turned into a two hour bicycle ride. Her favorite part of the ride was this four mile bridge. She only went to Astoria on weekends. If the trip was urgent, sometimes a coworker lent her their car, but she loved the longer ride if she had the time.

While crossing the bridge, she would reflect on the dark waves beneath her or the vibrant colors of the peninsula when the sun was just right. Joanie loved the ocean breezes, the strange smell of seaweed and damp sand. She once stopped at the bridge's center for half an hour just to watch seagulls swooping in and out of the metal supports. The cars zooming by her only added harmony to the music of the Columbia River's mouth.

Then something tainted it.

Even though it happened three months ago, the memory was still crisp. Joanie remembered crossing the bridge slower than usual that day on her black bicycle. Everything seemed brighter, more lighthearted. She wanted to take it all in. She wore a windbreaker and

electric blue running shorts, letting her tanned legs absorb the late-morning rays as she pumped them around. Her dyed black hair stuck out of the stubby ponytail she'd slept on, but she didn't mind. She planned to spend the rest of her day-off at the beach before catching a corny movie. Maybe something on Lifetime. Nothing momentous. Nothing out of the ordinary.

When she was almost three-quarters of the way across, her bobbing thoughts evaporated. There was something strange up ahead. Beside the road, she saw a bicycle flung carelessly on its side. Someone was at the railings, calmly looking out toward Cape Disappointment. Hesitantly, she braked. Her wheels squeaked loudly. The scene was bizarrely familiar. She'd seen it a number of times in those cheesy 80s videos. The ones everyone watched in high school explaining hygiene, self esteem, or whatever. She had laughed then, but she didn't feel like it now. Getting closer, she saw it was a guy, probably in his early twenties. He reminded her of her older brother, looking preppy but not stuck up. He even had his light-brown hair curved up in a faux-hawk. He didn't look back as she rolled to a stop behind him, one foot on either side of her bicycle. He stood on the opposite side of the railing from her; his back was pressed against the metal and a hand gripped it on each side as if he were about to take off in flight. His wrinkled T-shirt stuck to his back with sweat. They both stood in the morning's warmth, but Joanie felt cold all over. She stuck her hands in the pockets of her windbreaker, her slim silver phone nudging her knuckles.

"Hey," she said cautiously, "it's pretty, huh?"

He was quiet.

"It still has that affect on me. Sometimes I can't help but stop to look."

Still silent. He didn't even turn to acknowledge her. She wondered if she should call

someone, the police maybe.

“Did you know,” he whispered, “that I’m a mistake?”

Joanie’s mouth opened to answer, but she waited. *What if he stops talking?*

“Even when I tried to make up for it, I knew I would never be good enough.”

Her mind was blank. She knew that he needed help because that’s what she’d been taught. But that was supposed to mean getting someone else, someone experienced with this kind of thing. Where was she supposed to find an expert in the middle of a bridge? Should she call 911? She shouldn’t be here. God had sent the wrong person to help. She didn’t know how to handle this.

“See, even you know I’m a waste. You can’t even pretend that I’m important.”

“No,” she began, trying not to sound frantic, “no, I do think you’re--”

“No,” he said, “it’s okay.”

He kept looking toward Cape Disappointment, where the white sky met navy water. Joanie looked, too. She tried not to move, tried not to breathe too hard. Her fingers gripped her phone tightly. The ocean air brushed lightly across her face, using hushed tones. She watched his profile, his forehead was scrunched in dark thought. The corner of his mouth twitched and he tensed up. She thought he might let go and fall gracefully into the nothingness, but then he relaxed.

“Maybe I don’t understand, but maybe I can help,” Joanie tried again. “You can tell me anything you want to right now. Anything. What’s your name?”

His lips tightened. *He’s gonna jump right now.* She almost leapt to grab him around the chest, but his whisper stopped her.

“William . . . thank you.”

A loud breath escaped her lips. Then, for the first time, he turned, looked directly into Joanie’s eyes. She stared back earnestly. His were hazel. She saw a real person in those eyes. They were warm, almost happy just then, but suddenly they went dead. She blinked, and he jumped. One small moment, and he was gone.

Joanie couldn’t move or cry. She felt like her lungs were full of the salty ocean water. All she could do was stand. She hardly moved at all. She couldn’t seem to lift her arms or turn her head. She found herself up against the railing, looking hard into the waves below. She hardly remembered taking out her phone and fumbling with the numbers.

“911 emergency response,” someone answered.

“Hi, um, uh, I . . . I just saw someone jump off a bridge, and . . . and it just happened . . . I . . . he just jumped.” The voice didn’t sound like her own, someone else was using her mouth. She didn’t remember anything said after that, only hanging up.

A couple seagulls were arguing out across the water. They went back and forth for a while. She didn’t know how long she listened to them, how long she waited for someone to show up. She was simply there. Maybe it was hours, or maybe only minutes that Joanie stood leaning over the railing, right where she saw William for the last time. The last person to ever see him alive. Her eyes kept jumping away from his bike flung onto the ground.

They jumped back to the road. A black and white sedan was stopped next to her, lights flashing. *Where did that come from?* She hadn’t even heard the siren. Two officers got out of the car. The one from the passenger side approached her and introduced himself as Officer Connell, scratching his scruffy beard growing red and ragged.

“I’m Joanie,” she said, thinking these pleasantries were too normal for this horror scene.

“Joanie,” Officer Connell said, “I’m going to need to ask you some questions.”

She only nodded. He was overanxious and young, but he spoke quiet and slow, obviously not wanting her to freak out. Still, every phrase hit her with force: *Are you okay? What happened? What did he say? Was he angry? Why did he jump?*

“I don’t know I don’t know,” she repeated. *I don’t know anything about him, I don’t know what happened, I don’t know.* The driver of the patrol car, seasoned Officer Hayden, motioned her to sit in the backseat. He was a man of few words, and this was somehow comforting. She hunched against the metal frame, the door open, face in her hands. Officer Connell faced her, scratching his beard.

Questions kept coming, and Joanie heard the voice that wasn’t hers answering them. Everything blurred together. Officer Connell made her relive the moment she realized William really had jumped, the moment she finally threw herself against the railing searching for him, the moment she wanted to throw herself after him. Again and again she answered mechanically. The words came out, but they meant nothing. They were harsh, without substance. As dead as William was. Words couldn’t tell anyone what had happened.

Three months later, everything was different. Her yellow Geo was back in the owner’s parking space. Everyone used to worry, now no one thought any more of it. Her world before William had righted itself. It was like William had never existed, like it had never happened. But it had happened. She would never change back. Once in a while she still got on her bike, riding the almost twenty miles to Astoria.

Nobody knew she was on the Astoria-Megler Bridge now. The day might have been

brighter, more lighthearted, if the sun had been more than ice on her skin. Accusing thoughts dug into her like daggers. It was her fault. She said something wrong. She didn't go for help. She was too late to catch him. She came up with every possible thing she could've done differently, but it didn't change what happened. *If I couldn't save him, maybe I deserve to die, too.*

It was a routine thought. But every time she thought it, William's voice cut in, a lighthouse trying to guide her back to reality from the choppy waters she was fighting constantly now. Showing her the shore he chose to leave behind.

“ . . . ‘Did you know that I’m a mistake? . . . ‘No, it’s okay’ . . . ‘William . . . ’”

Yes, Joanie thought about William. Yes, she thought about what he went through on that bridge. Yes, she thought about jumping.