

The quadrangle is washed by rain, driven sideways in sheets. Students huddle under coats and umbrellas, making a dash for their next lecture or the library. Others are staying put, mingling in the foyer. Bruno observes the prettier girls without ever making it obvious.

It was he who suggested I lecture – two hours a week and four tutorials of half an hour each. Social psychology. How hard could it be?

‘Do you have an umbrella?’ he asks.

‘Yes.’

‘We’ll share.’

My shoes are full of water within seconds. Bruno holds the umbrella and shoulders me as we run. As we near the psychology department, I notice a police car parked in the emergency bay. A young black constable steps from inside wearing a raincoat. Tall, with short-cropped hair, he hunches his shoulders slightly as if beaten down by the rain.

‘Dr Kaufman?’

Bruno acknowledges him with a half-nod.

‘We have a situation on the Clifton Bridge.’

Bruno groans. ‘No, no, not now.’

The constable doesn’t expect a refusal. Bruno pushes past him, heading towards the glass doors to the psychology building, still holding my umbrella.

‘We tried to phone,’ yells the officer. ‘I was told to come and get you.’

Bruno stops and turns back, muttering expletives.

‘There must be someone else. I don’t have the time.’
Rain leaks down my neck. I ask Bruno what’s wrong.
Suddenly he changes tack. Jumping over a puddle, he returns my umbrella as though passing on the Olympic torch.

‘This is the man you really want,’ he says to the officer. ‘Professor Joseph O’Loughlin, my esteemed colleague, a clinical psychologist of great repute. An old hand. Very experienced at this sort of thing.’

‘What sort of thing?’

'A jumper.'

'Pardon?'

'On the Clifton Suspension Bridge,' adds Bruno. 'Some halfwit doesn't have enough sense to get out of the rain.'
The constable opens the car door for me. 'Female. Early forties,' he says.

I still don't understand.

Bruno adds, 'Come on, old boy. It's a public service.'

'Why don't you do it?'

'Important business. A meeting with the chancellor. Heads of Department.' He's lying. 'False modesty isn't necessary, old boy. What about that young chap you saved in London? Well-deserved plaudits. You're far more qualified than me. Don't worry. She'll most likely jump before you get there.'

I wonder if he hears himself sometimes.

'Must dash. Good luck.' He pushes through the glass doors and disappears inside the building.

The officer is still holding the car door. 'They've blocked off the bridge,' he explains. 'We really must hurry, sir.'
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 somewhere closer, beneath the bonnet. 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 for more than a 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 control onlookers and unhappy motorists.

The constable opens the door for me and hands me my umbrella. A sheet of rain drives sideways and almost rips it from my hands. Ahead of me the bridge appears deserted. The masonry towers support massive sweeping interlinking cables that curve gracefully to the vehicle deck and rise again to the opposite side of the river. 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 is a landmark, a tourist attraction and a one-drop shop for suicides. Well-used, oft-chosen, perhaps 'popular' isn't the best choice of word. Some people say the bridge is haunted by past suicides; eerie shadows have been seen drifting across the vehicle deck.

There are no shadows today. And the only ghost on the bridge is flesh and blood. A woman, naked, standing outside the safety fence, 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 or even 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.

The officer in charge introduces himself. He's in uniform: Sergeant Abernathy. I don't catch his first name. A junior officer holds an umbrella over his head. Water streams off the dark nylon 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 fence topped with five strands of wire, 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 Parkinson's Disease.'

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

'A sticker?'

'Disabled parking. Lets you park almost anywhere. It's almost as good as being a detective only we get to shoot people and drive fast.' She's obviously a more senior police officer than Abernathy.

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

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

'Shame. You could be like Doctor Who and I could be your female sidekick. Tell me something, how do you think the Daleks managed to conquer so much of the universe when they couldn't even climb stairs?'

'I guess it's one of life's great mysteries.'

'I got loads of them.'

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 and pinches a strand of tobacco from the tip of her tongue. Although not in charge of the operation, she's so naturally dominant that the uniformed officers seem more ready to react to her every word.

'You want me to go with you?' she asks.

'I'll be OK.'

‘All right, 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 two ambulances 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 before coursing through gutters and pouring off the edges of the bridge in a curtain of water.

Ducking under the barricades, I begin walking across the bridge. My hands are out of my pockets. My left arm refuses to swing. It does that sometimes – fails to get with the plan.

I can see the woman ahead of me. From a distance her skin had looked flawless, but now I notice that her thighs are crisscrossed with scratches and streaked with mud. Her pubic hair is a dark triangle: darker than her hair, which is woven into a loose plait that falls down the nape of her neck. There is something else – letters written on her stomach. A word. I can see it when she turns towards me.

SLUT.

Why the self-abuse? Why naked? This is public humiliation. Perhaps she had an affair and lost someone she loves. Now 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 late thirties or early 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.

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 forward. 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, A 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. LSD. Ice perhaps. I catch snippets of her conversation.

'No. No. Please. No.'

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

'I will. I promise. I've done everything. Please don't ask me . . .'

'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 confetti of rubbish swirls on the surface: books, branches and plastic bottles.

'You must be cold. I have a blanket.'

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

'Perhaps I could try to put it around your shoulders – just to keep you warm.'

Her head snaps towards me and she sways forward as if ready to let go. I pause in mid-stride.

'OK, I won't come any closer. I'll stay right here. Just tell me your name.'

She raises her face to the sky, blinking into the rain like a prisoner standing in an exercise 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. The lactic acid is building in her muscles. Her calves must be in agony.

'I have seen people jump,' I tell her. 'You shouldn't think it is a painless way of dying. I'll tell you what happens. It will take less than three seconds to reach the water. By then you will be travelling at about seventy-five 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 gaze is now fixed on the water. I know she's listening. 'Your arms and legs will survive intact but the cervical discs in your neck or the lumbar discs 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. Something is coming. Her eyes have turned to mine.

'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.