

Death Wish

LAWRENCE BLOCK

The cop saw the car stop on the bridge but didn't think too much about it. People often stopped their cars on the bridge late at night, when there was not much traffic. The bridge was over the deep river that cut the city neatly in two, and the center of the bridge provided the best view of the city.

Suicides liked the bridge, too. The cop didn't think of that until he saw the man get out of the car, walk slowly along the footpath at the edge, and put a hand on the rail. There was something about that lonely figure, something about the grayness of the night, the fog coming off the river. The cop looked at him and swore, and wondered if he could get to him in time.

He didn't want to shout or blow his whistle because he knew what shock or surprise could do to a probable suicide. Then the man lit a cigarette, and the cop knew he had time. They always smoked all of that last cigarette before they went over the edge.

When the cop was within ten yards of him, the man turned, gave a slight jump, then nodded as if accepting that the moment had passed. He appeared to be in his middle thirties, tall with a long narrow face and thick black eyebrows.

'Looking at the city?' said the cop. 'I saw you here, and thought I'd come and have a talk with you. It can get lonely at this hour of the night.' He patted his pockets, pretending to look for his cigarettes and not finding them. 'Got a spare cigarette on you?' he asked.

The man gave him a cigarette and lit it for him. The cop thanked the man and looked out at the city.

‘Looks pretty from here,’ he said. ‘Makes a man feel at peace with himself.’

‘It hasn’t had that effect on me,’ the man said. ‘I was just thinking about the ways a man could find peace for himself.’

‘Things usually get better sooner or later, even if it takes a little while,’ the cop said. ‘It’s a tough world, but it’s the best we’ve got, and you’re not going to find a better one at the bottom of a river.’

The man said nothing for a long time, then he threw his cigarette over the rail and watched it hit the water. He turned to face the cop. ‘My name’s Edward Wright. I don’t think I’d have done it. Not tonight.’

‘Something particular bothering you?’ said the cop.

‘Not . . . anything special.’

‘Have you seen a doctor? That can help, you know.’

‘So they say.’

‘Want to get a cup of coffee?’ said the cop.

The man started to say something, then changed his mind. He lit another cigarette and blew out a cloud of smoke. ‘I’ll be all right now,’ he said. ‘I’ll go home, get some sleep. I haven’t been sleeping well since my wife—’

‘Oh,’ the cop said.

‘She died. She was all I had and, well, she died.’

The cop put a hand on his shoulder. ‘You’ll get over it, Mr Wright. Maybe you think you can’t live through it, that nothing will be the same, but—’

‘I’d better get home,’ the man said. ‘I’m sorry to cause trouble. I’ll try to relax, I’ll be all right.’

ACTIVITIES

After Reading

1 Perhaps this is what some of the characters in the stories were thinking. Which seven characters were they (one from each story), and what was happening in the story at that moment?

- 1 'How easy that was – and how quick! It used to take me *ages* to get that much, and now it just takes minutes. Well, I know what I'm going to do first thing tomorrow. I'm going to give up my job. Work is for idiots!'
- 2 'Perhaps we should have phoned the Howells, but it didn't really seem necessary. She's so young and keen. She does seem a bit nervous, but it's her first day, so that's natural. I'm sure the children are going to like her. I'll leave them to have lunch together now . . .'
- 3 'That went very well. I was a bit worried about the signature, but he didn't seem to notice anything. I've got everything I need, and I've seen everyone I need to see, so now there's only one more thing for me to do. It's time to pay a little visit . . .'
- 4 'She's so pretty – even when she's shouting at me or crying! I'm worried about her, though. She won't stop asking questions. I do hope she takes my advice and stays indoors. Now I'd better get back to the house and see what's happening there . . .'
- 5 'This one's too smart for us, and he's not interested in money. But there must be *something* he wants. I've got to keep him busy until the others get back here. Well, he's a handsome man – perhaps he'd be interested in me . . .'