

THE
INCURABLES

Stories



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THE BRIDGE



Standing at the north end of the Main Street Bridge, Sheriff John Lewis saw, no more than fifty feet in front of him, a man and a woman hoist themselves from the pedestrian walkway onto the bridge's topmost guard-rail, grasp each other's hands, and leap as if they were intending to dance into the sky. It was 6:13 on what was otherwise an ordinary April evening.

Sheriff Lewis immediately formulated an explanation: *They're bungee-jumping.* And a consequence: *I'll have to arrest them.*

Even when he reached the smooth, round rail from which they'd jumped and saw no bungee-jumping equipment attached, he held firm to his understanding of what had happened. He allowed a moment to pass before he placed his hands on the rail and

stared over the side of the bridge. On the bicycle path 165 feet below lay the body of the man. A few feet from the path, in the overgrown grass, dandelions, and Queen Anne's Lace beside Celestial Creek, was the woman's body. He pulled back and shook his head, as if to clear the pair of images from it. But when he looked again, the scene was the same.

He reached to his hip, lifted his cell phone from its case, and dialed what he thought was headquarters. "I've got two suicides off the west side of the Main Street Bridge," he said to the woman who answered.

"John? What's going on? Are you all right?"

He realized his mistake with her first syllable. "Marybeth, I've just seen two people kill themselves." He told his wife where he was. He asked her to call 911 and have them send a car and an ambulance. His hands were shaking too much now for him to dial his cell phone.

He leaned over the rail again. A woman in electric lime jogging shorts and an Ohio Eastern University T-shirt was standing a few feet from the bodies, her hands covering her mouth. "Please step away," he shouted down to her. "This might be a crime scene." He didn't know if he was using the right language. "Please step away."

She looked up at him, her face contorted in what looked like disgust or agony.

"I'm the sheriff," he explained, "and I'm coming down."

By the time Sheriff Lewis labored down the stairs at the northwest corner of the bridge, he was winded and red-faced. He was sixty-four years old, and he'd been sheriff for less than a month.

When Sheriff Lewis reached the bike trail, he moved first to the man's body and put his thumb on the man's wrist. He felt a strong heartbeat but was sure it was his own. He lumbered over to the woman and did the same, but the drumming pulse he felt was also doubtless his. He looked up at the woman in the lime jogging shorts. She seemed frozen.

“They’re dead,” he said. When he heard the ambulance’s siren, he added, “I think.”

The ambulance and the police car arrived simultaneously, driving from opposite ends of the bike trail, which was just wide enough to accommodate the vehicles. The two well-toned men in the ambulance confirmed Sheriff Lewis’s hesitant pronouncement. Sheriff Lewis glanced over at Officer Mark Highsmith, who had joined the Sherman Police Department only two weeks earlier. He was the only employee in the department with less time on the job than Sheriff Lewis.

“What do we do now?” Sheriff Lewis asked him.

It wasn’t Officer Highsmith who answered, however. “Pray,” said the woman in the lime shorts.

— “You acted in a completely professional manner,” Marybeth assured him. It was a few minutes before one in the morning. They were in their queen-sized bed, in their dark bedroom, their air conditioner rattling in the window. “You did what was necessary. You handled the situation with grace.”

“I called you,” he said.

“But you told me exactly what to do,” she said.

“So that *you* could handle the situation with grace.”

Marybeth, who was nine years older than Sheriff Lewis, had had two strokes in the past eighteen months. She used to mountain-climb and go white-water rafting, but now she left the house only to attend physical therapy sessions. Sheriff Lewis used to be the inactive one. Before he became sheriff, he was an English professor at Ohio Eastern, where he’d worked for thirty-two years. His specialty was detective fiction, psychological thrillers, and true crime, and he liked nothing more than sitting in his study and tinkering with the commas in articles he’d written for *Studies in Popular Fiction* and other scholarly journals.

“They were a married couple, both forty-two years old,” he told Marybeth. “One of their neighbors said they’d been trying to have a baby for years. They tried every procedure University

Hospital offered. A week ago, their adoption of a Korean child fell through.”

“How sad,” she said.

“I don’t even know what drew me to the bridge. On my way home, I dropped off our letters to the boys at the mailbox in front of the post office. But instead of walking straight back to my car, I walked down to the north end of the bridge. If I had reacted quicker, I might have saved them.”

“It’s not your fault,” Marybeth said, her voice softer now. He knew she wanted to sleep. She’d waited up for him to come home, which had cost her.

“We’ll talk tomorrow,” he said, and he kissed first her hair, then her cheek, then her lips. Everything tasted dry and powdery, almost dust-like. Lately he’d begun to fear that their next kiss would be their last.

Two years ago, Marybeth had expressed concern about his impending retirement from the university. She didn’t know what he’d do without classes to teach, students to advise, and meetings to attend. Or she did know: He’d disappear into his study and emerge hours later smelling of decay.

In the late 1960s, Sherman had made its top law-enforcement position an elected one and had changed the authoritarian title “chief of police” to the friendlier “sheriff,” even though there was already a county sheriff. In running for sheriff of Sherman, John Lewis hoped to upend his wife’s idea of him as someone in danger of remaining in a holding pattern until his heart stopped or cancer called. He gauged his chances of winning at somewhere shy of 1 percent. But when the incumbent refused to distance himself from his best friend, a man who, in a psychotic break, murdered his wife and two children, and the other candidate was found to own land planted with enough marijuana to keep every high school student in the state high for a year, he became everyone’s fallback choice. It helped, too, that Marybeth tapped into her family inheritance to buy television, radio, and newspaper

ads, which emphasized her husband's service in the army and his long-standing participation in a Neighborhood Watch program.

During the last ten years, Sheriff Lewis's hair had turned gray and his waist had expanded like an inflatable ring at a swimming pool. If he was going to acquire a nickname in his new job, he was sure it would be "The Marshmallow." His wife, by contrast, was slimmer than she'd ever been—too slim. After her first stroke, she'd given up dyeing her hair, which was a ghost-like white. Her skin, which usually had a golden hue, had lately looked dishwater gray. When he expressed his concern to her doctor, a young woman as brusque as she was competent, she said, "There's no returning to Go, but we'll do the best we can."

Sheriff Lewis waited until he heard Marybeth's smooth, deep breaths before he left the bed and walked up the stairs to his attic office. From his window, he could see the bridge, its south end no more than a few hundred feet from his house. If he had been here, he would have shouted down a warning to Richard and Rachel Henderson. Would they have heard him? Would they have listened?

Sheriff Lewis sat down at his desk, clicked on his computer, and typed the words "suicide," "prevention," and "bridges" onto Google. He told himself he would investigate every site that came up. He had 2,050,000 to read.

— The next morning, Mayor Bloom sat at his desk, doodling with a blue pen on the sole of his right shoe. Sheriff Lewis sat in the hard-backed chair to the side of the mayor's desk. The mayor's office was on the second floor of City Hall, across the redbrick plaza from the clock tower. Sheriff Lewis had arrived at exactly eight o'clock. The mayor hadn't come to work until twenty of nine. At nine, he had to attend a ribbon-cutting ceremony at a bridal store at the Sky Lake Mall, which was why he asked Sheriff Lewis to speak as fast as he could.

"We need to secure the Main Street Bridge against additional suicide attempts," Sheriff Lewis said.

“I’d like to,” Mayor Bloom said, “just as I’d like to redesign the Sky Lake East exit off Interstate 77 so people stop flipping their cars on the hairpin turn. Six people flipped their vehicles last year—and one of them is still in a wheelchair. And if we’re dreaming about safety now, I’d go ahead and close all the bars and restaurants on the days of Ohio Eastern football games. And on game days I’d also prohibit every store within a sixty-mile radius from selling alcohol. We’ve had no deaths on football Saturdays during my watch, thank God. But the number of close calls makes me wonder when our luck is going to run out.”

The mayor, who was Sheriff Lewis’s age, was well over six feet tall and weighed no more than 175 pounds, but he moved in the world like a short, fat man—with languidness and suspicion. It looked like the mayor was drawing a flower, with large, looping petals, on his shoe. “Anyway, if we put up fencing or netting now, it might be seen as an admission of guilt. We might as well mail the families of the dead couple—the Hendersons, right?—the millions of dollars they’ll sue us for.”

“Excuse me?”

Mayor Bloom signed his name below the flower doodle before depositing the pen behind his right ear. Gazing at Sheriff Lewis, the mayor said, “When I was young, I wanted to be an artist. My mother wanted me to be the Jewish FDR.” He gestured around his office, the walls crowded with the mayor’s landscapes and self-portraits. “Here you see the result. Mediocrity is the offspring of compromise.” He gave a resounding laugh.

Out of politeness, Sheriff Lewis nodded, although he suspected this wasn’t the response the mayor wanted.

Mayor Bloom said, “We don’t have the money to settle a lawsuit, so let’s not provoke one. And to get approval to add safety features to the bridge would call for a vote of the city council. I can tell you right now what two members of the council would say: ‘Whoever is desperate enough to jump off a bridge is desperate enough to find some other way to die. So why waste the money?’ The Main Street Bridge may be a convenient portal

to the next world, but it isn't the only one, and we can't police them all."

Sheriff Lewis saw the Hendersons holding hands, saw the sky embrace them, saw the sky let them go. *I was an eyewitness*, Sheriff Lewis thought to say. But he checked himself, knowing that his having seen what happened didn't strengthen his argument to secure the bridge.

"Besides," the mayor said, "before the Hendersons, how long had it been since anyone had jumped off the Main Street Bridge? Half a century? Maybe longer."

Sheriff Lewis's cell phone rang. Although he had a police radio, which he wore dutifully around his waist, his subordinates, in acknowledgment of his struggle with police codes and radio frequencies, usually called him. Sheriff Lewis began an apology to the mayor, but the mayor was on his feet and heading out the door.

"Sheriff," said the voice on the phone, "we've got another jumper."

— The jumper was Harriet Smith, who lived on Prairie Street, which ran perpendicular to the south end of the Main Street Bridge. She was eighty-six years old. She'd brought a stepladder to assist her in climbing onto the railing. A graduate student from Costa Rica, Hector Márquez, who had been walking back to his apartment, helped her set up the ladder. He assumed she wanted to observe the two beavers who were swimming in the narrow creek below.

"One minute, I was showing her where the beavers were," Hector said, "and the next, I was watching her leap off the rail and fall to the bicycle trail like a bird without wings." He shook his head and said "Very, very sad" so many times Sheriff Lewis put a hand on his shoulder.

Sheriff Lewis thought: *I should have had an officer on the bridge as soon as I saw the Hendersons jump. I should have anticipated copycat behavior. This is my fault.*

And so he had Officer Highsmith take the first shift on the Main Street Bridge. “I want an officer here twenty-four hours a day,” Sheriff Lewis said to Highsmith, as if the new officer had the authority to enforce such an edict.

Sheriff Lewis had left his car in the parking lot of the Dollar Store on the north side of the bridge. As he walked to it, he heard a voice behind him: “Sheriff Lewis, may I have a word with you?”

Sheriff Lewis turned to find a short, red-haired man with a palm-sized tape recorder in his hand. Looming behind him, his arms stretched as if to grab him, was Officer Highsmith.

“I don’t think he’s planning to jump,” Sheriff Lewis assured Officer Highsmith. “Better see what that family has in mind down there.” Sheriff Lewis pointed to the south side of the bridge, where a man and woman were pushing two children in a double stroller. Officer Highsmith retreated.

“Would you call this an epidemic?” the red-haired man asked. His name was Otis Allen and he was the owner, editor, and publisher of *The Horizon*, a weekly print newspaper with a daily Web update. He was also, as far as Sheriff Lewis knew, the paper’s only correspondent. He’d done a flattering profile of Lewis during the sheriff’s race, although toward the end of the profile, he didn’t fail to mention that Lewis’s experience with crime fighting had been mostly theoretical.

“I don’t think three suicides make an epidemic,” Sheriff Lewis said.

Allen countered: “In a town of fifty thousand people such as Sherman, three suicides is the equivalent of New York City having five hundred and forty.”

In his old job, Lewis would have engaged Allen in a debate about the value of such statistical extrapolations. Instead, he said, “The situation is sad and disturbing, but we will do our best to prevent additional misfortunes.”

“How?”

Sheriff Lewis glanced over the bridge, which was a step or two more than one hundred yards long and accommodated two single lanes of traffic as well as pedestrians on elevated concrete walkways on both the east and west sides. Officer Highsmith was running toward a teenaged boy in ripped blue jeans and a white T-shirt. The boy had been walking across the bridge but now appeared fixed in place like an animal on the highway, a beaver or groundhog waiting to become road kill. “Stop where you are!” Officer Highsmith yelled.

Officer Highsmith’s words achieved the reverse: The boy turned and ran in the opposite direction.

Here’s our solution, Sheriff Lewis would have said if the scene hadn’t struck him as ludicrous. He knew enough about his new job to say nothing at all.

— “She was eighty-six years old,” Marybeth assured her husband in their dark bedroom. The air conditioner was on again. It had been an unusually hot April. “She had terminal cancer. And I wouldn’t be surprised if the coroner finds she had a heart attack before she even hit the bike path.”

“If I had put an officer on the scene immediately, it wouldn’t have happened.”

“You can’t know that. Instead of the student from Costa Rica, it might have been one of your officers who helped her up onto the stepladder. No one expects an old woman to throw herself off a bridge.”

“I’m thinking of closing the bridge,” Sheriff Lewis told his wife.

“To foot traffic?”

“I’d like to close it to all traffic, at least temporarily. But I realize this wouldn’t be a popular decision.”

“I suspect it wouldn’t,” said Marybeth, her voice cracking from fatigue. “People will resent being punished for what three desperate people did. How many vehicles travel over the bridge on an average day?”

“Five thousand.”

“So what’s wrong with keeping an officer on the bridge all the time?”

“It means leaving another area of town uncovered. Tonight, for example, the officer on the bridge would ordinarily be patrolling Partytown.”

“Is it still a fire trap? It’s amazing what students will agree to live in.”

“I have to hope the students behave,” Sheriff Lewis said. The moment he finished speaking, he heard the wail of a fire engine. He heard his cell phone ring in his pants on the floor.

Three minutes later, he was driving to Partytown, where two houses were blazing.

— Sheriff Lewis’s cell phone woke him up at 6:14 the next morning. “Are you crazy?” Mayor Bloom said. “You can’t pull an officer out of Partytown, especially now. Ever heard of spring fever? Ever heard of graduation? If these kids aren’t screwing each other blind, they’re setting fire to each other’s bunk beds. And the landlords—I prefer to call them scumlords—of all of those tinderbox houses in Partytown are furious. Three of them called me after midnight last night. Talk about a bunch of litigious assholes! They’re already talking about a recall election for both of us. They want no less than four officers patrolling Partytown at all times.”

“What about the bridge?” Sheriff Lewis mumbled in his half sleep. He hadn’t come home until three in the morning.

“I told you: Let them jump. No one cares when a depressed geriatric flings herself over a bridge. But when the star cornerback of the football team runs out of his house with his ass on fire, that’s a catastrophe!”

“I thought he was a linebacker.”

“I don’t care if he’s the punter,” the mayor said. “If he plays football, his butt better not be burning.”

“I’ll do what I can,” Sheriff Lewis said. “I have to weigh the—”

“No, no, no,” Mayor Bloom said. “There’s no weighing involved. At least two officers in Partytown. We have to keep these assholes happy or the party’s over for us.”

— Sheriff Lewis thought to crawl back into bed beside his wife but he knew he wouldn’t be able to sleep. So he slipped upstairs to his office, where he clicked on his computer and read the morning’s *Horizon*. The top story was, of course, Harriet Smith. There was a sidebar to the main story, a commentary written by Otis Allen. It began, “In his decades as a university professor, Sheriff John Lewis saw death every day—in the pages of the mysteries and true crime accounts he read. Now he’s seen death in reality, and he looks at once befuddled, scared, and guilty.”

He heard his wife call him. She wanted water.

“There’s a glass beside the bed,” he said.

Her voice was faint, as if he was hearing it from across the street: “I can’t move.”

After he helped her sit up and brought the water to her lips to drink, he told her he thought he should take her to the hospital. “So I can sit in their bed instead of ours?” she replied. “I’ve earned this bed, John. Don’t take it away from me.”

Dorothy, a retired home health-care aide they’d hired to look after Marybeth during the day, was coming in an hour, and this thought brought Sheriff Lewis immense relief.

“What were you doing?” Marybeth asked him.

He told her.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “I bet there are only fifteen people in the whole world who read that thing.”

— “*The Horizon* is calling it an epidemic-in-the-making,” said the young woman in a yellow summer dress and pigtailed who was sitting in his office when he arrived at work. Her name was Clementine Crowe, although everyone called her CeeCee, she

said. She was a junior at Ohio Eastern and the president of the Delta-Delta-Delta sorority. She was chewing what Sheriff Lewis initially thought was gum but was now certain were sunflower seeds. “By executive order, I’ve already formed the Main Street Bridge Safety Brigade—Bridge Brigade, for short.”

CeeCee’s dyed hair was so blond it was almost white, and her skin radiated from what Sheriff Lewis could only imagine was the most intense artificial tanning session available without a prescription. He was sure it would be possible to warm his hands by the glow of her face.

After CeeCee explained how the Bridge Brigade intended to operate—Tri-Delt volunteers would be posted at the four corners of the bridge from eight a.m. to midnight in order to escort pedestrians across—she confessed to what she hoped to achieve beyond stopping would-be suicides: “We have the personnel and, to be honest, the leadership to be named Tri-Delta Sorority of the Year. Until now, we didn’t have a project by which to prove our worthiness.” In a whisper, she added, “The president of the winning sorority gets to visit the White House *and* Disney World.”

“Let me make this clear: There’s no epidemic here,” Sheriff Lewis said. “If we’d had two automobile accidents in two days, we would call it unfortunate and move on. And what we’ve had the past two days is unfortunate.”

“So you don’t like my idea?”

Sheriff Lewis sighed. “I do,” he admitted.

“So it’s a go?” she asked, and she flicked her right hand as if she was turning the ignition in a car. He nodded.

Seconds later, she was on her cell phone, speaking so quickly he couldn’t understand her.

“When will you start?” he asked when she was off the phone.

“Five seconds ago,” CeeCee said. “You’ll know who’s in the Bridge Brigade by our pink T-shirts and our shorts with three pink triangles across the derriere.”

It was the speed at which the Bridge Brigade had reported for work that caused Sheriff Lewis to stare at her with his mouth open, but she must have ascribed another cause to his befuddlement. “Derriere is French for rear end,” she explained. “You know, posterior. Buttocks. Butt. Caboose. Back door. Personal floatation device. Booty. Groove thing. Piggly wiggly.”

“I understand,” he said.

“Helicopter pad. Fantasy Island. The Final Redoubt of Desperate Men. Bottom. Bum. Two Mountains and a Long, Dark Valley.”

“Thank you,” the sheriff said, chuckling. “I’m fully informed now.”

After CeeCee left, Sheriff Lewis tried to busy himself with the other obligations of his office. But he couldn’t stop thinking about the bridge. So he stepped out of his office and walked the six short blocks to the bridge’s north end. He saw girls in pink standing like radiant soldiers at each corner. Officer Highsmith was at the south end, talking to a sorority girl whose hair was even lighter than CeeCee’s but whose tan wasn’t in the same league.

This might work, Sheriff Lewis allowed himself to think. *We’ll guard the bridge for a week or two. People with copycat ideas will have time to cool off and think twice.* He expelled a large breath. It was as if he’d spent the last couple of days under water and had only now reached the surface.

Although Sheriff Lewis would have preferred to keep Officer Highsmith on the bridge all day, he dreaded another early-morning call from Mayor Bloom. Besides, it looked as if the Bridge Brigade could handle the situation as competently as any police officer. He told Officer Highsmith to remain on the bridge another hour before heading over to Partytown.

Sheriff Lewis returned to his office, located on the first floor of City Hall. His office was no larger than the average prison cell, and its only window looked out onto Main Street and its idling busses. He had yet to decorate the walls, and they remained an

industrial gray, but he had transferred most of the books he'd kept at his office at the university to bookshelves here. If someone ever asked him to give an impromptu talk on Sherlock Holmes or P. D. James's great poet-detective, Adam Dalgliesh, he was prepared.

From his main desk drawer, Sheriff Lewis removed a bound copy of Sheriff Peter Marcello's *Reflections and Suggestions*, which Marcello had left him as a welcoming gift. He opened his predecessor's book at random: "One persistent problem you will encounter is motorcyclists who make use of the six straight stretches of road in town, especially Airport Avenue, to show off both the power of their bikes and their suspect ability to control them while kneeling, standing, and even fornicating."

If people screwing on Harley-Davidsons were the worst problem he faced from now on, Sheriff Lewis thought, he'd be the happiest law-enforcement official in America.

He couldn't have been daydreaming for more than five minutes when his cell phone rang.

— Officer Mark Highsmith and Alice Emerald, a member of the Bridge Brigade, lay face up on the bike trail below the east side of the Main Street Bridge. It was likely that every bone in their bodies was broken, yet Sheriff Lewis found something disconcertingly serene in their expressions. They looked like lovers who instead of gazing into each other's eyes had chosen to stare together at the sky.

The ambulance arrived, attended by the same pair of efficient weight lifters. The bodies were soon swept up, shut inside the vehicle, and borne off.

"I should have been suspicious," said CeeCee, who'd come silently to his side. It was obvious she'd been crying.

"Suspicious of what?"

"Of the pendulum. Last month, it was all I could do to get Alice out of bed. This past week, she has been ecstatic. The pendulum was bound to swing back."

“What about Highsmith?”

“Maybe he was trying to save her. Maybe he thought it would be like jumping into a river after a drowning person. Or maybe . . . maybe . . .” She looked up at him, her face streaked with tears and so bright it almost obscured her somber brown eyes. “Maybe I have no idea.”

“I don’t know how you could.”

There was a pause in their conversation before Sheriff Lewis said, “I’m afraid we’re going to have to retire the Bridge Brigade.”

“I was going to propose doubling our numbers,” CeeCee replied. “And from now on, I’ll require each member to sign a pledge not to jump off the bridge.” As she looked at his skeptical face, she added, “Please?”

Otis Allen appeared quickly, as if he’d risen from the dank brown creek beside them. His red hair was wet with sweat, and he carried a white towel over his shoulder like a boxing corner man. He put his palm-sized tape recorder in front of Sheriff Lewis’s lips. “Are you ready to call this an epidemic?” he asked.

“I’m ready to call it hell itself if that’s what it’ll take to stop people from jumping.”

Sheriff Lewis’s last word hadn’t yet completed its journey from his mouth to the tape recorder when, behind him, he heard a terrible thud.

— “I’m sorry, John,” Marybeth said in what used to be the comfortable darkness of their bed. But no place felt comfortable since the suicides began. Or was it since Marybeth had her first stroke? The latest victim was Stanley Halbert, a forty-eight-year-old convenience store owner who had claimed to be crossing the bridge in order to deliver lemonade to members of the Bridge Brigade. (He carried a jug of lemonade and a stack of paper cups to support his claim.) In his brief look into Halbert’s background, Sheriff Lewis found nothing to explain why he would commit

suicide. His business, located a block from the Ohio Eastern campus, was thriving. He and his wife had celebrated their twentieth wedding anniversary the previous month with a Caribbean cruise.

With Mayor Bloom's swift consent, Sheriff Lewis had assigned two officers to patrol the bridge at all times. Officers working in eight-hour shifts would keep both sides of the bridge under twenty-four-hour surveillance. Every pedestrian would be treated as a potential jumper.

In selecting officers for bridge duty, Sheriff Lewis had chosen the six who seemed least likely to imitate Officer Highsmith, whose life story, alas, yielded few clues about his motivation for killing himself. Meanwhile, with the sheriff's reluctant blessing, CeeCee had doubled the number of Bridge Brigade patrollers. There were now eight on the bridge at one time. Sheriff Lewis had asked her to have them keep an eye on his officers. He had asked his officers to keep an eye on the sorority girls.

With his force stretched thin, he could only pray Partytown wouldn't burn to the ground. He also had had to remove an officer from Spanishville, which was named after the Guatemalans, Hondurans, Mexicans, Nicaraguans, Panamanians, and Salvadorans who had come in the mid-1980s to be the manual labor in the construction of the university's twenty-thousand-seat indoor coliseum and afterward had settled in a neighborhood north of it. Although Spanishville was a low-crime area, its residents were inevitably blamed for the unsolved murders, rapes, assaults, arson, and burglaries in town.

"I'm sorry, John," Sheriff Lewis's wife repeated, her voice so soft he had to put his ear next to her mouth. "It's like a plague of irrationality." Her head seemed to have melted into the pillow. He was amazed to see again how gaunt and wasted she looked. She was once his Scandinavian princess, but her beauty had been trumped by old age and infirmity.

"I think we need to have your doctor look at you again," Sheriff Lewis said.

“So she can tell me I’m seventy-three-years old and in failing health?” she managed in a weak voice.

When there was a long silence, his wife said, “Would you like to talk about the bridge?”

“No, thank you,” he said, and he kissed his wife on the cheek and waited until she fell asleep before going upstairs to his office. He looked out of his window at the bridge, illuminated by its eight gold lights. It was past midnight, so all the pink-clad members of the Bridge Brigade were gone—all save one. She might have been five hundred feet from where he stood, but he recognized her from her pose, one hand on her hip, the other in motion in front of her as if she was conducting an orchestra rather than merely speaking to one of his police officers.

He reached for his phone and dialed her number, which he had memorized without intending to. When she answered, he said, “I think we have it covered now, CeeCee, although of course I’m grateful for your help.”

“I’ll give it another half an hour,” she replied. “By one o’clock, I’d like to think that even the most desperate will have gone to bed.”

“It would be nice to think so.”

“And shouldn’t you be in bed, too, Sheriff?”

“I suppose I should.” He told her he could see her from his attic window, and when she waved, he waved back. He doubted he was anything more to her than a shadow, but she acknowledged him all the same.

— Sheriff Lewis woke up before his newspaper was delivered. He had a cup of coffee in his kitchen, which overlooked his back yard. Thirty years ago, it hosted a swing set and sandbox. His two boys were now grown and gone, his older son in Hong Kong, his younger in Paris. Before the suicides, he had never felt especially sentimental, at least as far as he noticed, but as he recalled his boys playing in the yard, child raising seemed an easy and ever-joyful task. He could secure his children’s happiness simply

by giving them a push on the swings. He could secure their safety, a bruised knee or scrape on the arm notwithstanding, by building a fence around their play area or, in the absence of an enclosure, by being a moveable fence, keeping them contained.

Now this, he thought. This out-of-control death lust. This madness.

He clicked on the TV on the kitchen table. On its twelve-inch screen, he recognized the scene immediately: the south end of the Main Street Bridge. A woman with buttercup-blond hair was on live, interviewing people about why citizens of Sherman were throwing themselves off the bridge. Because it was six thirty in the morning, her subjects were either old people who, having gone to bed before eight the previous evening, were alert and coherent or Ohio Eastern students who had stayed up all night, perhaps in expectation of seeing another jumper, and were delirious.

There were a large number of people in the background. *Like spectators at a high-wire act without a net*, Sheriff Lewis thought.

“I think people in this town and in towns everywhere across the country have turned their backs on Jesus,” said a white-haired woman. “What they’re left with is the devil or self-destruction. Maybe self-destruction is the better choice.”

“I think it’s like the Bermuda Triangle,” said a young woman, half of whose black hair was dyed bubblegum pink. Her eyes darted around as if they were viewing a frenetic tennis match. “The bridge is haunted, and I bet when people cross it, they hear voices saying, ‘Jump, jump, jump.’ I’m telling you, there’s an evil presence here.”

“I’m willing to bet there are very strong gusts of wind that are lifting people off the bridge,” said a young man who may have been sporting a goatee or may have forgotten to wipe his chin after eating chocolate pudding. “If the mayor of Sherman was willing to put up some windbreaks, I’m sure we would see a decrease in the number of so-called suicides.”

The last person interviewed was CeeCee, who, after spitting out a couple of sunflower seeds, said she couldn't explain the suicides. "My only concern is to stop them," she said. "Today, I'm meeting with the director of mental health at University Hospital, and I'm hoping to have two volunteer counselors down here by noon. Last-minute therapy might be exactly what people need to keep living."

As the anchorwoman asked a question of the blond correspondent, the camera showed Sherman police officers escorting groups across the bridge. After they'd crossed, some people chose to recross. The bridge, Sheriff Lewis could see, was becoming an amusement park ride.

As the blond correspondent summed up the situation, using words such as "strange," "disturbing," "mysterious," "weird," and "wacky," Sheriff Lewis saw a blue van drive slowly past her and onto the bridge. The color and design of the license plate weren't ones he recognized.

Over the correspondent's shoulder, in the middle of the bridge, he saw the van stop. He wondered if it was about to release a pack of what he'd heard referred to as "disaster tourists," people who traveled to the scenes of floods, tornadoes, earthquakes, and the like.

The van's two back doors spread open. Out raced at least eight people. The driver's-side and passenger doors also expelled several people. Whoever was manning the camera stepped past the correspondent to focus on the van's passengers. The scene was shot in wide-angle: six people on the east side of the bridge, six on the west side, men and women, all of them ascending the black guardrails. Sheriff Lewis's police officers were at the far ends of the bridge, out of the camera shot.

"Stop them!" Sheriff Lewis shouted at the screen. "Please, God, stop them!"

Standing on the topmost guardrails on each side of the bridge, the van's former passengers held still a moment, like a flock of birds on a pair of telephone wires, then, in unison, jumped.

“I saw them!” shouted the blond-haired correspondent into the camera. “What you saw on TV, I saw live! I can prove it was real!” It was as if she was trying to convince herself.

As Sheriff Lewis continued to shout, “Stop them! Stop them!” his cell phone rang against his hip.

— Via telephone, Sheriff Lewis ordered the bridge closed to both automobile and pedestrian traffic. As he arrived on the scene, concrete roadblocks were positioned at both ends of the bridge. Orange barrels were employed to block pedestrian access. Police tape was strung like yellow tinsel over both the roadblocks and the barrels. People and vehicles were soon jammed on either end of the bridge.

Occasionally, someone would shout, “I want to jump!” Sheriff Lewis didn’t know whether the voices were serious or only full of morbid humor.

Journalists—television, radio, print, Internet—had descended on the scene with ambulance-like speed. Some were gathered on the bridge’s north side; others were on the trail by the creek, hovering near the twelve bodies.

Mayor Bloom had called Sheriff Lewis to tell him he’d be down as soon as he could think of a reasonable answer to the inevitable questions, one of which was, “Do you think you’re capable of stopping this insanity?” and another of which was, “Will you resign?” Mayor Bloom thought Sheriff Lewis had better prepare his own answers.

Sheriff Lewis saw all twelve bodies into the ambulances, two of which had come from Sheridan, the town thirty miles to the west. He couldn’t stand to look at any of the faces, however. If he saw one of them, he was certain he would throw up, an act the reporters would feel no remorse in publicizing. He was losing too much already; he refused to lose his dignity.

When the bodies had been driven off, Sheriff Lewis climbed up the stairs and walked onto the middle of the bridge, to where

the blue van was parked. No one had bothered to turn off the engine. “We hear the FBI is sending agents,” said Officer Reinaldo Cruz, who stood cross-armed at the back of the van.

“I haven’t heard anything,” said Sheriff Lewis, who would have welcomed intervention by any higher authority. The influx of jumpers from out of state—the twelve latest victims had come from California, Mississippi, Montana, Nebraska, and Oregon as well as Alaska, which was where the van was registered—proved that the Main Street Bridge was the nation’s problem.

The sheriff’s cell phone rang. It was the mayor again. “The governor said he would of course send in the National Guard if it wasn’t occupied digging trenches in the sands of the Middle East. He’s sure this mess is going to cost us all our jobs unless we come up with a dramatic solution. He’s talking about destroying the bridge.”

“And putting what in its place?”

“Hell, I don’t know. Maybe a suicide theme park. In the meantime, I’ve ordered netting put up. There’s an outfit in Columbus that specializes in that sort of thing. And I can tap into Sherman’s emergency fund without consulting the city council. The fund is meant for fires and floods and other disasters. I think this qualifies.”

“I’ll keep the bridge closed until the netting goes up.”

“It should be up by tonight. This Columbus outfit prides itself on how fast it can make bridges suicide-proof. They put up one in Ithaca, New York, in two hours and fourteen minutes. And their work is supposedly indestructible. The Ithaca bridge collapsed before the netting did.

“Rush hour will be hell. River Run will be clogged up like no toilet any plumber’s ever seen.” The mayor grunted. “Did I hear right that that van isn’t local?” he asked.

“Uh-huh.”

“Where’s it from?”

Sheriff Lewis told him.

“Well, they found the last frontier all right.”

— There were other people who had traveled from long distances to end their lives. Sheriff Lewis could distinguish the would-be suicides from the people who'd come to witness a suicide because of how little the would-be jumpers brought with them. One man from Austin, Texas, had only an old baseball mitt and an apple. A man from Orono, Maine, had brought a photograph of his Dalmatian and a water pistol.

CeeCee had succeeded in persuading University Hospital to send psychiatrists, psychologists, and social workers to the scene. Four people who'd come to jump off the bridge agreed to be admitted to the hospital's psychiatric ward.

On the bike path below the bridge, a "Live In" had begun. First a couple of dozen, then hundreds, of people gathered to sit on blankets on the concrete bike trails or in the neighboring brush. Two fishermen had motored up from the river, their boats looking huge on the thirty-foot-wide creek. A performing space with a microphone was set up directly under the bridge. For the most part, the musicians played old protest songs, although one of the acts was a newly formed acoustic punk group called Beast of a Bridge. All their music, announced the lead singer, would be composed on the spot. To Sheriff Lewis, what they played sounded like tin cans falling from a kitchen shelf. Somewhere in the noise he recognized the word *lonely*.

Sheriff Lewis remained on the scene until three thirty, when he realized that his dizziness was likely the result of having unintentionally fasted since last night's dinner. His weakened condition made him think of his wife. He called Marybeth, but reached Dorothy, who told him Marybeth was sleeping.

"How's she doing?" he asked.

Dorothy, who was always direct, told him she thought Marybeth needed twenty-four-hour care, especially if he was going to be keeping irregular hours. She spoke without accusation, but he worried he was letting Marybeth down. At the same time, to take a leave of absence or resign as sheriff now would

doubtless be seen as cowardice. He thought, too, that it would be an admission of culpability over what had happened on the bridge. He did feel culpable, but he knew he would feel less so—perhaps he would even feel exonerated—when the suicides had stopped.

“I hope you don’t mind my forwardness,” Dorothy said, “but I’ve talked to a couple of women already. They could start today, if need be.”

“Well, good,” Sheriff Lewis said softly. He added, “Go ahead, then. Thank you.”

As Sheriff Lewis was about to say goodbye, Dorothy said, “I hope you’ll permit me an observation.”

“Of course.”

“I don’t know how much of what ails her is her body and how much is her mind.”

“What do you mean?”

“You said she used to be active—an adventurer, you said?”

“She talked about climbing Mount Everest,” Sheriff Lewis said, and he wondered why she hadn’t; money wasn’t the issue—what she’d inherited from her parents would have covered it. Was it because he never expressed much interest in her most outrageous adventures, which weren’t so much outrageous as they were simply out of the country? He’d always told her: I can travel the world in the pages of a book and I never have to leave my armchair. “She’s climbed a number of mountains in the States,” he added, although he couldn’t remember the name of a single one.

I didn’t support her the way I should have, he thought. He said, “This . . . this condition of hers is another kind of adventure, another mountain to conquer.”

“Is that how she sees it?” Dorothy asked.

“I’m certain of it,” he said, speaking with all the confidence of a man who was feeling the earth shake, who was seeing the ground split beneath him.

“I’ll make sure someone’s looking after her all twenty-four hours of the day,” Dorothy said.

Sheriff Lewis thanked her again and said goodbye. He tried to recall what Marybeth had said about any of her mountain-climbing experiences, and now he remembered her speaking of one climb, how being on the top of this particular mountain was like “being alone with the sky.”

Walking to the north side of the bridge, Sheriff Lewis saw CeeCee instructing a quartet of her sorority sisters in what to do on the now closed bridge. They were to give people interested in crossing the bridge the option of proceeding to River Run or talking with one of the mental health professionals available in the yellow tent in the parking lot of the Dollar Store.

When she was done, Sheriff Lewis said to her, “I think you need lunch even more than I do.” He offered to treat her to a pizza or a hot dog or whatever she wanted. She chose tofu curry at One Night in Bangkok, a Thai restaurant next to the Sherman Public Library, three blocks from the bridge. Sheriff Lewis appreciated the restaurant’s dark red décor, its dimness, its feeling of seclusion. He was tired of being in the sun, on the bridge, exposed.

Yet soon after Sheriff Lewis and CeeCee ordered, Otis Allen appeared at their table. He looked as tired as both of them combined, but he doggedly held out his tape recorder.

Sheriff Lewis told Allen all he knew about plans to make the bridge suicide-proof.

“And when people turn to other means to end their lives?” Allen asked. “What’s the long-term solution, Sheriff?”

It was CeeCee who answered. Sitting straight in the red-cushioned booth, she said, “We need to discover how to ask each other for help—without fear of ostracism or ridicule or judgment.”

Allen turned to Sheriff Lewis, who nodded his agreement.

“And how do you encourage people to turn to each other for help?”

“You let them know you’re here and you care,” CeeCee said. “You let them know you want them in the world. You let them know you won’t judge their condition, only try to ease their pain.”

“Anything to add, Sheriff?”

“I think she said it all.”

When Allen left, Sheriff Lewis turned to CeeCee. “What you said was perfect.”

“It applies to you, too.”

“So I seem in need of help?”

She didn’t hesitate: “Yes.”

He laughed. “I won’t be one of the jumpers,” he said.

“How can you be sure?”

“It’s called knowing yourself. It comes with age.”

“Now you’re patronizing me,” she said.

“I’m sorry.” He looked at her, her pink face glowing like a desert mirage, her hair as blond as desert sand.

He said, “And you? Can you be sure?”

She answered quickly: “No.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’ve tried before.”

When he didn’t respond immediately, she said, “Don’t worry—it was pills, not a bridge. And I was young—eighteen.”

“How old are you now?”

“Nineteen.” She amended, “Nineteen and a half.”

— By a quarter of eight, when the sun was a red spot two inches above the horizon, netting twelve feet high shot straight up from the black railing on the Main Street Bridge. It was supported by a thick wire attached to poles at the bridge’s four corners. The weave on the netting was tight and the material was slicker than plastic. Aesthetically, however, the netting was ghastly; its height and mud color gave the bridge the dark, claustrophobic feel of a tunnel with a skylight.

Mayor Bloom and Sheriff Lewis stood at the center of the bridge. “This ought to do it,” said the mayor, patting the sheriff on the back.

“I hope so.”

“It better,” the mayor said. “I’m so anxious I’ve started doodling all over my body—with both hands!” He pulled back the sleeves of his white dress shirt to reveal naked women with Barbie-sized breasts on each forearm.

“If Otis Allen gets a peak at them, I’m doomed,” the mayor said. “But I’m too fond of them to wash them off.” He sighed. “I’ve heard people say that there’s a reason for everything. In my darkest hours, I fear that the reason for the Suicide Bridge is to send me into retirement.”

“I don’t think it has anything to do with us,” Sheriff Lewis said. “There are larger reasons.” He thought of war in the Middle East and the panic-inducing threat of terrorism; he thought of the polluted, overpopulated, boiling world. He thought of the everyday troubles of illness and heartbreak, of work (or lack of work) and dreams defeated. At the same time, he thought, *The bridge could be my punishment. But for what? For being a hermit and dampening Marybeth’s worldly dreams? Or it could be an opportunity. For what? For what CeeCee wants to do—confront our isolation, reattach ourselves to each other?*

Hundreds of people were still assembled at the bridge’s north end, and the mayor excused himself to speak to them. After a five-minute reflection on recent events, the mayor inaugurated the new, suicide-proof bridge with the words “No more madness,” a chant the crowd picked up and amplified.

Presently, the concrete barricades were removed from both ends of the bridge, and people rushed onto the elevated pedestrian walkways. Soon after, the bridge was opened to automobile traffic, and the cars crawled across it so their passengers could stare at the imposing netting.

“It looks like a spider web,” someone next to Sheriff Lewis said. He turned and found his predecessor, Peter Marcello, rub-

bing the netting with his right hand. “And it feels like a wet sliding board.”

Sheriff Lewis informed him, with a degree of pride, about the reputation of the netting manufacturer.

Marcello, a man with a weight lifter’s physique and receding black hair cut to near baldness, didn’t seem to care. He asked, “How are you holding up, Professor?”

Sheriff Lewis didn’t know whether Marcello’s last word was meant to mock or console. He attempted a joke: “Well, I haven’t jumped off any bridges.”

“But I bet you’ve thought about it,” said Marcello.

Sheriff Lewis readied a denial, but Marcello spoke again: “Too late now.”

Marcello removed his hand from the netting and, in a softer voice, a voice Sheriff Lewis wouldn’t have recognized as his predecessor’s, said, “I would offer you my help. But I’m not sure I’d have any to offer in this situation. And maybe you won’t need it now.”

“Thanks anyway,” Sheriff Lewis said.

“You’re more than welcome,” Marcello said, and Sheriff Lewis thought he was going to add, “Professor.” Instead, Marcello said, “Goodnight, Sheriff.”

About five minutes after Marcello left the bridge, Mayor Bloom called Sheriff Lewis on his cell phone: “I think we’re viable again. We’re FDR after Pearl Harbor. A crisis occurred on our watch, but we soldiered on and now we’ll reap the benefits.”

Sheriff Lewis thought to remind Mayor Bloom that FDR had had tangible adversaries. And what were he and Mayor Bloom fighting? Nothing they could point to with certainty. Nothing they could be sure of stopping.

— Although CeeCee expressed only qualified faith in the netting’s ability to prevent more suicides, she had given the Bridge Brigade the night off. She, however, joined Sheriff Lewis at nine, and with two police officers, they each covered a corner of the

bridge. Sheriff Lewis planned to withdraw one of the officers in the next hour. Sometime after this, he would make a decision about leaving the bridge without a police patrol.

After their celebratory burst onto the bridge, people had gone home, and there had been no pedestrians since. An occasional vehicle drove by. On one occasion, a bearded man in a red Toyota pickup shouted at Sheriff Lewis: “Thanks a lot, Sheriff.” From the man’s tone, Sheriff Lewis didn’t know whether he was being genuine or sarcastic. The driver of the next pickup to pass, who looked like the brother of the previous driver, slowed down to shout: “You ruined the fun! Now we’ll have to go kill ourselves with shotguns and razor blades!”

Several times, Sheriff Lewis turned to place his palms against the netting. The bridge had the look and feel of a cage. The people of Sherman, he thought, were locked in to life.

At ten thirty, Sheriff Lewis sent one of the officers to patrol both Partytown and Spanishville. He decided he would send the other, Officer Cruz, to join him in an hour.

To CeeCee, Sheriff Lewis said, “I think it’s bedtime.”

“Why do I think you won’t fall asleep yet for hours?” she asked.

He smiled. “For someone who doesn’t know me, you know me too well.”

“I’ll buy you a drink,” she said.

“All right,” he told CeeCee, “but let me make a phone call first.”

He dialed his home number. “Dorothy?” he asked the voice on the other end.

“Close. I’m Millie, her sister-in-law. This must be Sheriff Lewis.”

“Yes.”

“Marybeth is sleeping.”

He asked how his wife was doing, and Millie said she was fine. She’d had a small snack an hour and a half before, had watched a television program, then had fallen asleep. He told

Millie he'd be home in an hour—providing nothing happened on the bridge or elsewhere.

Sheriff Lewis and CeeCee walked into town, to Don's Underground, whose six middle-aged male patrons looked up from their beers, surprised to see a college-age woman in the bar. There was an old poster on the wall celebrating one of Sherman's local bands, the No Exits, the four young women attempting to look both jaded and sexy. The red-haired guitarist had taken one of his classes when she was in high school. He'd heard she'd gone on to study at Harvard and then at Tufts Medical School. So often Sherman's most talented, most intelligent, most industrious, and most inventive left and never returned. This wasn't only Sherman's story, he supposed.

The song playing in Don's Underground was twice as old as CeeCee.

They ordered drinks at the bar and brought them to a booth, its wooden table sprinkled at the end near the wall with peanut shells. CeeCee asked him what he would have been doing on a night like tonight when he was in college.

"You're assuming I can remember so long ago," he said, and he drank from his Killian's.

She held him with a patient smile, and he understood she didn't want a facetious answer. "You want to know a secret? I met Marybeth when I was in college, at Ohio Eastern."

"That qualifies as a secret?"

"She was my professor—my instructor, I should say. She was a grad student in environmental sciences and was a teaching assistant in a lecture course called something like 'Flora and Fauna from Coast to Coast.' The class met some kind of requirement, otherwise I wouldn't have been anywhere near it.

"We were dating before the end of the semester. And she still had the nerve to give me a 'C.'"

"Ouch," CeeCee said.

"Well, I deserved it, I guess." He sighed. "I was a senior, living off campus on the second floor of a house in Sherman's

First Ward, which was even more run down than it is now. A married couple, the Wrights, who might have been in their mid-thirties, or maybe they were younger, lived below me. I didn't know them well. Sometimes I heard them at night having loud, bitter arguments. The words they yelled at each other—I couldn't imagine using them in any context, much less shouting them at someone I loved, although for what it's worth, I did see them on occasion walking back from town, holding hands.

"Several years after this, after I was married, after I'd been in the army, after I'd finished grad school at Ohio State even, I learned that Mrs. Wright—Allison was her name—had killed herself. She'd done it a few months after I'd left the house. No one contacted me at the time. I guess they didn't have to. It was supposedly an open-and-shut case. But I wondered."

"Because of the arguments you overheard?"

"Yes," Sheriff Lewis said. "And because there was so much passion in her side of the arguments. She gave as good as she received. And because on the occasions I saw her returning from town hand in hand with her husband, she looked happy."

"I looked up the case on my first day as sheriff—that's how interested I was in it. I was sure I'd find out that Mr. Wright, Jason, was the sheriff's cousin or the stepson of the mayor—exonerated because of his connections. But Jason wasn't even in town when his wife killed herself. He was in California."

He paused to wipe peanut shells onto the floor. "This seemed illogical—unfair even. Allison seemed so much alive."

CeeCee put her hand near his on the table. He moved his hand to wipe more peanut shells to the floor.

"Have you always been this sad?" she asked.

His first instinct was to tell her he wasn't sad at all, merely disturbed by recent events, as anyone would be. His second impulse was to tell her she didn't have the right to pry into his life. But his sense of propriety felt rusted and obsolete, hardly worth holding on to in the presence of someone who was, despite the short time he'd known her, a friend.

He told her about the last two years, the changes in his life, in Marybeth's health.

"And you?" he asked her. "What possibly could have prompted you to make such a serious attempt on your life?"

CeeCee sipped her Sprite before saying, "I wish I could tell you I'd found out I had cancer or my father had been abusing me or my mother had died when I was four and I had begun to feel an overwhelming grief over her loss. But none of this would be true. My life isn't perfect. I mean, my parents are divorced, I've had an abortion, my brother is a Republican, but added up, they aren't exactly a recipe for suicide."

"So why try to kill yourself?"

She sighed. "Have you ever looked at the rest of your life and asked yourself, 'Why bother?'"

He was about to answer when his phone rang.

"Sheriff, Officer Cruz reports shooting a would-be jumper on the Main Street Bridge."

— When Sheriff Lewis reached the scene three minutes later, the deceased, a man in his late twenties or early thirties, was lying face up on the pedestrian walkway on the bridge's east side. He wore shorts and a T-shirt but no socks or shoes. Sheriff Lewis would learn that he'd coated his feet and hands with a home-made epoxy in order to scale the slick netting.

Sheriff Lewis's cell phone rang. It was Mayor Bloom: "I think the Sherman police department should have a new motto: 'We kill 'em before they can kill themselves.'" He puffed into the phone. "Let's follow this strategy to its logical end. If we murder everyone in town, we'll be assured of being number one in suicide prevention."

There was a long pause before Mayor Bloom punctuated what he'd said with a single, un-mayor-like word.

— When Sheriff Lewis returned home, at so late an hour he couldn't bear to see what time it was, Millie was sitting on the

couch in the living room, watching a documentary about World War II prisoners. Grainy black-and-white footage revealed pale, shirtless men standing against walls, as if waiting to be executed. After Sheriff Lewis introduced himself, Millie said, “She called out once, and I rushed upstairs, but she was only talking in her sleep.” Millie’s white hair was in two pigtails on her shoulders. She looked like Pippi Longstocking as a senior citizen. “She said the name Billy several times.”

“Billy,” Sheriff Lewis repeated.

“I’m sorry,” Millie said, and he thought she might be blushing. “I hope Billy isn’t the name of some ex-sweetheart of hers.”

Sheriff Lewis felt something open inside him. It was a box full of everything he’d hidden from his wife, and although its contents were mostly trivial—the names of girls he’d had crushes on in high school, the times he’d skipped his office hours in order to watch action movies at the Sky Lake Mall—it made him sad to think he might never share them with her.

“Billy was one of her brothers,” Sheriff Lewis said. He’d died when Marybeth was ten years old. She had three other brothers, all living. She’d mentioned Billy maybe twice in the last decade.

Excusing himself, Sheriff Lewis walked upstairs to check on his wife. He stood at the foot of the bed for ten minutes before he could at last make out her breathing, which seemed to come from a far place. He wondered if she was giving up, if she was talking to Billy because she thought she’d soon be with him.

Presently, he ascended the stairs into the attic. He crouched in front of the window and stared at the bridge. The gesture was superfluous. Wherever he looked, he saw the bridge. Whatever he thought about was connected to the bridge.

He turned to his computer and read Otis Allen’s latest entry in *The Horizon*. “To blame Mayor Bloom, who once aspired to be the next Picasso, and Sheriff Lewis, who came to his current office straight from the scholarly seclusion of Ohio Eastern University, for what has occurred on the Main Street Bridge might,

on first glance, be exactly what we should do. Both men's lack of expertise surely is part of the reason why Sherman seems so hopeless as it attempts to halt a suicide epidemic.

"But are we completely unhappy with what has unfolded over the last few days? Even as we have professed sorrow for the families of the deceased, haven't we privately thrilled in seeing or hearing about our fellow townspeople—indeed, our fellow countrymen (and next, no doubt, our fellow citizens of the world)—hurling themselves off the bridge? We delight because we think that another person's weakness means we're strong, another person's disease means we're well. We delight when we can say, 'Better him, better her, than me.'"

Sheriff Lewis resumed his place at the window, staring at the bridge. He tried putting Otis Allen's last sentence in his mouth, tried uttering it to the bridge in the distance. But the words began to trade places with each other. And so in the end, he was saying, "Better me than him, than her. Better me than them."

Perhaps the bridge wanted me all along, he thought in sleepless delirium. Perhaps I am the sacrifice it sought from the beginning.

— At half past six the next morning, a van painted in rainbow colors and a black pickup truck with a pink cannon in its bed stopped in the middle of the Main Street Bridge. The back door of the van opened and out popped six happy-faced clowns. They wore everything a clown usually wears, right down to the giant, polka-dotted, pointed shoes. The drivers of the van and pickup truck, a pair of bouncer-sized men in black T-shirts and black cowboy hats, stepped out of their vehicles and raised the semiautomatic rifles they were holding. One of the men pointed his rifle at Sheriff Lewis, who had taken three steps onto the south end of the bridge. The man fired two shots over Sheriff Lewis's head.

Crouching, Sheriff Lewis retreated to the end of the bridge, his heart pounding so hard he thought he'd throw it up. He'd walked to the bridge this morning with no other purpose than to verify how secure against death it was.

Two clowns jumped onto the back of the pickup truck. One stepped into the mouth of the cannon, the other ignited it. There was an ostentatious sizzling sound followed by a gargantuan boom. The clown in the cannon shot over the netting on the west side of the bridge like a football sailing over a goalpost.

Sheriff Lewis stood, rushed forward, and shouted, “Stop this immediately!” A bullet sizzled past his ear, and he crouched and backed up.

Sheriff Lewis was 150 feet or so from the pickup and its cannon. He was armed, but he didn’t trust his marksmanship; he might shoot one of the two television reporters who were standing, microphones in hand, on the north end of the bridge. There were no police officers anywhere, and Sheriff Lewis remembered, as if in a dream, ordering the bridge’s police detail suspended after what Officer Cruz had done.

Boom! Another clown flew from the cannon and over the netting. It was an extraordinary thing to witness, Sheriff Lewis thought, but only until the clown reached the peak of his flight. When gravity proved supreme, it was sickening.

By now, dozens—no, probably more like a hundred—people had gathered at the ends of the bridge to witness in person what they’d seen a moment before on TV. Some had scribbled messages on poster boards, urging the clowns to return to the circus or come to Jesus. One poster board said, “Hi, Mom.”

If death alone had been the clowns’ aim, they could have done a neater job by turning the semiautomatic rifles on themselves, Sheriff Lewis thought. This was suicide as entertainment. This was suicide as public spectacle, as comedy, as circus.

Boom! Out of the cannon flew another clown. He soared into the sky. He waved and wiggled his feet. He met an invisible wall and plummeted.

Sheriff Lewis saw CeeCee on the north side of the bridge. She must have pushed her way to the front of the crowd. Now she was walking with haste across the bridge. Sheriff Lewis

saw one of the black-shirted men turn his rifle on her. “No!” he shouted, and the next time he shouted the word he did so in full stride. He ran toward CeeCee like the halfback he’d never been.

A moment later, Sheriff Lewis heard the sound of blades. He looked up and saw a military helicopter approaching the bridge like a giant dragonfly. A man in fatigues inside the open cargo hold, carrying what looked like a bazooka, fired canisters onto the bridge. They released a thick, purple smoke.

Sheriff Lewis stopped, and as he was about to cover his eyes, he saw the helicopter’s windshield explode. The helicopter careened before skimming over the netting on the east side of the bridge and smashing into the netting on the west side. For a moment, the helicopter looked like a fly caught in a spider’s web or a fish trapped in a net. But both helicopter and netting soon disappeared over the side of the bridge.

Another helicopter approached, but it, too, took fire. The helicopter slammed into the netting on the east side of the bridge and exploded, debris shooting into the sky and flying everywhere. In seconds, fire melted all but a few strands of the netting.

Boom! Another clown flew toward the sky. But with the netting now gone, the cannon seemed superfluous, needless theatrics.

“CeeCee!” Sheriff Lewis yelled. He’d lost her in the purple smoke. “CeeCee!” He coughed and yelled and coughed.

Boom!

He couldn’t see much beyond the end of his nose. And now he heard a different noise from the sky. It wasn’t from a helicopter, he was sure, but from an airplane. Or two. He heard a sound like certain fireworks make before they explode. *It’s a bomb*, he thought. A second later, an explosion filled his ears and the bridge trembled so violently he fell to his knees.

Are they bombing the bridge? he wondered. *Bombing the bridge to save us from it?* He laughed and coughed and coughed again. “CeeCee!”

He was terrified she was dead. “CeeCee!”

Boom! Another down shot from the cannon? Or was it another bomb dropping?

Sheriff Lewis rose and stumbled against something—someone. It was one of the van’s drivers, his black T-shirt as tight around his muscled chest as skin. “Are you interested in a cannon ride?” the man said, and he gestured behind him. When Sheriff Lewis didn’t answer, the man put his arm around Sheriff Lewis’s shoulders and led him deeper into the smoke. A moment later, they’d reached the back of the truck. The man said, “Can you climb up yourself or do you need a boost?”

Sheriff Lewis thought. *This is a dream and I am powerless to stop it.* He put his right knee on the back of the truck and felt the man hoist him.

“Don’t you dare!” The voice was so familiar that, in another life, it might have belonged to his daughter.

“CeeCee?”

Sheriff Lewis freed himself from the man’s grip and stepped down from the truck. There was the crushing boom of more explosions. “CeeCee?”

Sheriff Lewis moved forward, but found himself in thicker smoke. When he heard footsteps behind him, he turned around. A rush of wind cleared the purple tear gas and permitted him to see, standing side by side, the two drivers, who had removed not only their black T-shirts but all their clothes. Holding hands, the men raced to the west side of the bridge, climbed up to the top-most rail, and jumped, kissing in midair.

“Why?” asked a voice he failed to recognize as his own.

— Due to the government’s errant bombing, a third of Spanishville was destroyed. In the days that followed, residents complained that they had been intentionally targeted. No one was willing to risk a lawsuit against the government, however, for fear of retaliation against the community’s undocumented mem-

bers. But with help from the Amish who lived on the west side of Sky Lake, Spanishville was rebuilt in fourteen months.

City Hall was destroyed, and Mayor Bloom was buried under his desk, under rubble, for two days. When he emerged, he spoke of the “strangely satisfying” experience of being marooned with “limited but sufficient art supplies”: a ream of white office paper, a pen, and the blood that occasionally oozed from the glass cuts in his body. He composed more than a hundred sketches, mostly of what he remembered of his childhood home and yard. “When there’s no serenity to be had in the present,” he said, “the past is the only retreat.”

There were five fires in Partytown, although none of them could be linked to the bombing. Half of the university’s twenty-thousand-seat coliseum was destroyed, however. It was now a ten-thousand-seat amphitheater.

No bomb ever hit the bridge.

But swamped in tear gas and feeling vibrations from bombs that seemed to be exploding all around him, Sheriff Lewis thought he was at ground zero. It would be only a matter of time, he was convinced, before he was killed. His life had been, on the whole, good, he thought, although lately he’d lost contact with the good. There was no carryover of happiness from one day to the next, no reserve of joy one could tap into. Each day brought the likelihood of despair as much as happiness. And unlike happiness, despair did seem to accrue, to pile onto itself from one sleepless night to the next until the thought of meeting it again in the next moment was intolerable, was like an earthly damnation.

Boom!

In the smoke, a body collided into his body. Sheriff Lewis felt her hair against his chin, her breasts above his belly. Her bright face pierced the purple tear gas like the sun.

“CeeCee!” he said, and being able to state this as fact rather than wish seemed as remarkable as anything he’d ever seen or done.

“You,” CeeCee said softly and with relief. “You’re still here.”

Boom!

Boom!

“Stop it!” CeeCee shouted at the sky, which neither of them could see. “Stop it, please! There are only two of us left, and we both want to live!”

She turned to Sheriff Lewis and grabbed his hand. Her hand was hot; he could feel her blood pumping through it, wild with life. “I’m telling the truth, aren’t I?” she asked him. “You do want to live, don’t you?” She squeezed his hand, as if to prod him toward the right answer.

He prepared to mimic her optimism, but as his eyes blurred, succumbing to the tear gas and more, he saw a landscape of loss. He wondered when the concrete and iron he was standing on would dissolve beneath him. He feared to what degree he wanted it to.

“Keep holding my hand,” he told her.