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Robert Papadopoulos

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# *The Bridge*

by Robert Papadopoulos

**I**n Pasadena, California there's a bridge that serves as the major east-west thoroughfare between Eagle Rock and Pasadena called the Colorado Street Bridge. The bridge is 1,486 feet long and is known for its Beaux Arts arches, railings, and lighting. I only recently learned its official name as it has been colloquially referred to as Suicide Bridge going back as far as the Great Depression.

Pedro lived with his father in a small house tucked away in the hills of Altadena, all the way up Allen Avenue. His parents were separated and he lived with his father. I heard his mom was bipolar once but I have no way of knowing if that was true or not. His dad was a nice guy though, he was always polite to me the few times I met him. I never met his mother and Pedro never talked about her.

I remember being at our friend Nico's house, which was just down the road from Pasadena High School when I heard that Pedro's mom had committed suicide. Nico lived in a big house with his mom and grandmother. Everything inside was really old and smelled like cats. Nico had a newish car—a Kia or a Hyundai—that was pretty thrashed. He treated it with that level of privilege typical of somebody that knows something is replaceable. Nico had basically taken over the garage, and it was where he kept all of his bikes. He had a bit of talent when it came to BMX, which he was usually too intoxicated to employ. We used to hang out in the garage with the tools,

spare parts, and cigarette butts scattered about, sitting on whatever was available.

That day, we were sitting on our white five gallon buckets drinking sprite with promethazine and codeine cough syrup, smoking weed and cigarettes. Nico got a text message from a friend of ours, Calista. Calista, many years later, would disappear after picking up a particularly dedicated Heroin habit at Cal State Long Beach -- but who could've predicted that?

“Holy shit,” Nico said, breaking a silence that was too stony to be awkward. The silence continued because everybody was in their own heads, wading through their own thoughts, and Nico had a tendency to exaggerate, “hole-lee-fucking-shit”. I clambered around looking for my pack of cigarettes which I had put somewhere stupid and was having the hardest time finding. I eventually found them under the bucket I was sitting on.

I pulled out a cigarette and lit it, and went through my mental routine in which I told myself I needed to quit, again. “What happened, bud?”

“Pedro’s mom fucking killed herself.” Silence. A good minute of it.

I didn’t really know what to think. I was having a hard time feeling any sort of way about the death of a woman I had never met. I couldn’t even begin to imagine what it must feel like to lose a parent to suicide, so my emotional response was almost non-existent. An attachment to somebody requires a history, and those histories evoke emotion. If I choose to reminisce

and think back to when I was a child, I can remember holding my mother's hand as I walked to get a puppy from a family down the street, or the times my father would throw me in the air and catch me. These memories produce a feeling that I equate with love. I lacked the history with Pedro's mother to achieve any kind of reaction at all. I lacked the empathy to feel my friend's pain. Of course, I could logically understand the pain of losing a mother to something like suicide must be horrible, but I could not feel it.

"I've uhh...never met Pedro's mom," I said lamely.

"Me neither," Matt agreed. "Let me have one of your cigarettes though." Matt was a small kid, with a chubby face that usually had a fair speckling of acne. Much to his chagrin, people frequently asked Matt if he was Chinese. Matt was Indonesian Dutch, and he was very proud of it. There's no nice way to say it, but he was a little fucking thief. He stole from everybody. I knew for a fact that he was in the habit of stealing stuff from Nico's house. He'd never stolen anything from me, though. I always wondered why. I could never figure out if it was because he knew better, or if he just valued our friendship.

"Dude, he just brought up somebody's mom dying, and you're gonna use it to make a play to bum a cigarette?" I was a little bothered by the way our friend's mother's suicide just drifted right by him.

He lazily replied, "You gonna use it as an out not to give me one?" Earning him a look from Nico.

"Have some respect for the dead," Nico said.

Holding his phone and staring at the screen with a furrowed brow.

“Have you met his mom then?” Matt asked.

“No.” He kept looking at the screen like he was trying to find something to say.

“So what the fuck do you care then?”

“Because he’s my best friend.” Nico was staring at Matt now with a look that said, “are you fucking kidding?” Matt looked exasperated. I looked at Matt and wondered for the hundredth time what it must be like to steal from people that trust you. At times it seemed like Matt had almost no conscience. I remember when he stole our friend’s wallet out of his pocket when he passed out after drinking and then helped him look for it the next day.

“So what happened?” I asked.

“I don’t know. Calista said she was texting Pedro’s girl, that fuckin’-what’s-her-name bitch, and then she said that Pedro’s dad came and swooped him because his mom killed herself.”

Another moment of silence, and when it seemed like Matt wasn’t going to say anything, I decided to be the one to take the responsibility of moving the conversation onward. “Poor fucking Pedro, dude.” The cigarette finished so I lit up another one with the butt of the first -- this seemed like the kind of conversation that excused chain smoking. “How’s he holding up?”

“I don’t know he hasn’t answered me.”

Matt was browsing craigslist on his phone and

seemed completely unperturbed by any of this. Nico was obviously bothered by it, but seemingly out of a sense of loyalty towards Pedro. This suicide, although I did not know the woman, struck me. It reminded me when I tried to take my own life the year before.

“I wonder what made her do it?”

“Pedro said she was bi-polar,” as if this was supposed to explain itself.

“Yeah, maybe.” I wasn’t convinced. “But there had to be some sort of catalyst.”

“I don't know, man; I just hope Pedro is okay.” He went back to staring at the phone screen.

I had to get up and take a walk down the alley behind the garage and smoke to myself for a few moments to gather my thoughts. The alley way was lined with trash and spotted with garbage bins. There were a few parked cars, but not many since it was the middle of a work day.

A few years ago I had tried to take my own life by swallowing 50 pills of a prescription medication I had. I remember what my catalyst had been.

It seems mundane, petty, even cliché'd now, but it was because things hadn't worked out with a girl that I cared about. She was damaged, in retrospect. It's horrible to say, but we came from different worlds. She'd been horribly abused and I had been relatively sheltered. It took me years to realize that when you love somebody you're basically volunteering to share their pain, and her pain was something I hadn't been ready for. The things

that had been done to her opened up a world of cruelty to me that I hadn't been able to imagine. The feeling of impotence concerned with the whole ordeal may have been the worse part. There was nothing I could do for her.

I kicked a rock down the alleyway, lost it, and started kicking a new one, smoking as I went.

When things didn't work out, I had invested so much of myself in trying to help somebody else, I decided I'd rather eat a bottle of pills than spending the time and energy to rebuild myself.

I remember the dark room I was in, the only light coming from a computer screen. I remember the bottle of pills, which I naively thought would just put me to sleep. I remember lying on the bed and telling myself "it's over", even smiling as I closed my eyes with some kind of macabre sense of relaxation. But it was just beginning.

I got the most violent spins I've ever felt and ran to the bathroom to vomit. Shortly after, I went into status-epilepticus, during which the seizures were so violent that I smashed the bones in my face to pieces. I remember every second of being unable to control my body and watching it destroy itself. I remember it until I blacked out and woke up six days later in the hospital with a face I didn't recognize due to the swelling.

I hated thinking about it. I kept it down deep. My family didn't discuss it. I didn't want anybody to know it happened. I wish I could just erase it. Sometimes I wish I could just erase everything and start over.

When I woke up, my mother and father were there.

The doctors hadn't been sure how I'd wake up. Luckily, my body was still fully functional. I felt guilty. They told me that I could have just as easily woken up with half of my body completely paralyzed.

My parents didn't have to speak a word to me, because the pain due to fear of loss was written on their faces. How could I have done this to the people I love? It was tantamount to an act of betrayal. What had driven me so low to believe that, for that instant, I had no one, and that it was not worth living? The emotional trauma I inflicted upon my loved ones is something I would never forget and is enough to make me trudge through life no matter how inadequate I feel.

So why did she do it? That is what I couldn't help but wonder. What was her catalyst? Was it the feeling of isolation? Why did I even care?

A week or so later, I still hadn't seen Pedro, which was completely understandable given the circumstances. I was sitting in Calista's backyard on a dirty plastic chair that seemed to be part of a white plastic lawn furniture set. The table was next to me, but equally dirty. It was mostly brown from being outside for so long, and covered in spider webs. There were three other chairs, Matt was in one and Calista was in the other, while the last one was out in the middle of the yard.

The backyard was a veritable junkyard. There were rusted pieces of metal which seemed to lack any applicable purpose all over the place, trash that had been forgotten on days like today, and innumerable cigarette

butts lying about. Although the yard was a pigsty, it was much cleaner than the inside of the house which smelled like cat excrement from the three or four cats living inside. There'd frequently be cat shit or throw up left where it lay for weeks. Calista lived with her father for reasons that were never entirely clear to me. Her mother was rich and lived in the hills of Pasadena. She was a large woman with a very masculine body and presence. The complete opposite of Calista that, at one point, was absolutely beautiful. All I can remember about her these days is her brown hair, and her eyes. I can't even remember what color they were anymore, it's been so long, but I'll always remember how the first time I met her they seemed to look right through me. Her name is a greek derivation of 'most beautiful' and for a while she lived up to it.

She was an alcoholic. Calista'd been drinking a fifth of Popov a day since she was sixteen. Somebody told me that her father used to touch her when she was younger. There wasn't even a shower in the house she lived in, there was a bathtub that everybody shared, and the tub was absolutely disgusting, like it had never been cleaned. You'd never know any of this by looking at her though. She always smelled clean, with a hint of cheap perfume, and never looked greasy or dirty. Despite all the chaos in her life, she still managed to get straight A's while we were at school together, and got into a good college. It was there she found Heroin, and everything remarkable about her faded away along with the girl I loved.

It was 11:00 A.M on a Wednesday in July and we were chasing Jack Daniels with warm Dr Pepper. Calista lived in Sierra Madre on a street called Windsor in a house that is no longer there. Another friend of ours had lived down the street at the end of the block, but he violated his parole and the feds came and took him away. The judge gave him 17 years and I never saw him again. If I had known that morning was going to be the last time I saw him, I might've hugged him goodbye. He barricaded himself in the house and they brought a swat team to come and get him. The SWAT team shot tear gas in and dragged him out and that was it. I remember because a week or so later, I went to smoke with his uncle and went into the house which had all the windows and doors open. When I got inside my eyes watered up and I started coughing. The tear gas lingered for quite some time and the family had to live in it. Whenever I'm anywhere near that street, I think of my friend and wonder where he's at.

I had just come back from the liquor store and was gutting a swisher.

"Matt let me get a little weed for this here."

"I don't have any." He was on his phone and didn't look up.

"Quit trying to smoke for free."

"Nah, I really don't." He was still trying to avoid eye contact by staring at the phone, but it was obvious he wasn't doing anything on it.

"Why do you do this every time?" After going back and forth for a little while he coughed some weed up and

between his and my own we had enough for a nice little blunt.

“You hear anything about Pedro, Calista?” I asked, still curious.

“I heard his mom jumped off Suicide bridge,” she said while drinking deeply from the Jack Daniels and following it with a small sip of Dr Pepper.

Matt spoke up “Kind of cool isn’t it? I mean it’s called Suicide Bridge but I’ve never known anybody to jump off of it. It’s almost like knowing a celebrity.”

“You are such a fucking asshole. Our boy lost his mom and you’re making jokes”

“I’m not joking, you guys just don’t want to say it... he hated her anyways.”

“Even worse. They never had a chance to reconcile.”

“He hates her in the kind of way I don't think they were gonna reconcile.” I was gonna lay into him about being an asshole but Calista took the opportunity to speak up.

“We’re all gonna go to the Arroyo tomorrow if you wanna tag along.”

“Fuck that shit,” Matt said. “I’m not about to walk with Pedro under Suicide Bridge, what kind of bullshit is that?” He looked at both of us in turn, “You don’t think that’s fucking creepy? Walking with a kid to look at where his mom died?”

“I don’t know,” she said, “but it was his idea.”

Nico was the only one that could drive so we all piled into his car and drove over to the Arroyo. The

Arroyo Seco is a long, dry gulch of protected parkland. We occasionally go over there at night to drink because nobody bothers anybody. The Gulch is surrounded by urban development, but for the most part maintains some semblance of an ecosystem, and is crowned by Suicide Bridge hundreds of feet above.

We walked for a while making small talk and drinking and getting high en route. Eventually we were almost directly below the bridge and Pedro stopped.

“This is where she fell.”

I looked at Calista “Matt was right dude, I should’ve stayed home from this shit.”

We were under a large pine that was conspicuously missing some of the branches in an almost straight line. There were rocks and sand underneath the pine, some of them were discolored.

“This is where the bitch died.”

“Let’s go, buddy, this is stupid,” Calista said. He didn’t answer.

“Fuck her,” he muttered to the discolored stones, ignoring everybody around him.

I huffed, “For fucks sake,” and pulled out my cigarettes while he stared, transfixed at the spot where his mother allegedly hit the dirt. “Let’s get out of here.” I lit two, and gave one to Calista and started walking back with her the way we came. Nico and Pedro were still there, Nico saying nothing and Pedro just staring, going through an emotional roller coaster that I couldn’t begin to understand. I held Calista’s hand for what might have

been the last time before we went our separate ways.

I looked up at the bridge again and it looked different then than it ever had before. After that day it became something supernatural. I marveled for a moment longer at the great white arches that spanned across the gulch as they held up tons of steel and concrete. From far below, I could see the barrier that Pedro's mother would have had to climb over in order to jump. I thought about the moment she looked down, and wondered what was going through her head. I couldn't help but consider the fragility of the human psyche. As a species, we were capable of amazing achievements, the bridge itself was a testament to that -- each arch a modern Atlas. However, achievement can only be reached if we're able to carry the weight of our own experiences. It had stood all of these years without falling or wavering, and I wondered if I would be able to do the same, or if life would one day overcome me as it had her.