

Joe, Me and the Dog

by Raymond Abbott

I have a friend, Joe Franklin. He is a house painter by trade, elderly now. Yet at age eighty, he is still painting, and even climbs ladders to paint high places. What I have to tell you happened about fifteen years ago.

Joe is not your ordinary house painter. I say that because he is well-read, and I don't connect being well-read with painting houses. I have had many interesting conversations with Joe. He has strong opinions about literature and politics. He categorizes himself as a nihilist in the mode of Herman Melville. He likes to say that if a way could be found to put an end to mankind, well, that would be all to the good.

I first met Joe in a coin shop, and we have been friends ever since. He has painted my house, inside and out, several times now, and the lakefront cottage I own, I bought from him.

I was still married one summer when I hired Joe to do an inside paint job for me while my wife and daughter were away in Ireland for two months. Joe observed how infirm my collie dog Kelly was. I admit Kelly was quite lame, but then she was about thirteen, and she was obviously in serious decline.

"You and me and that dog, we ought to jump off a bridge someplace," Joe announced one day. He knew that my marriage was faltering, but I had had no thought whatsoever about ending it all.

One of Joe's areas of expertise was suicide. He knew lots of ways to do oneself in, but he had a particular interest in jumping off bridges. He had statistics on all the major high bridges in the world.

"You don't want a low bridge," he told me. "Under no circumstances, a low bridge." Tall and gray-haired, Joe had rather a horse face. He was in apparently good physical shape, and not ill as far as I could tell.

After about the third time Joe brought up the notion of himself, the dog and me jumping off a bridge, I decided to play along.

"Which bridge did you have in mind?" He looked at me somewhat surprised.

"Of course, the Golden Gate. Nobody survives that leap." While my marriage was indeed going badly, more troubling to me was the boredom I was lately suffused with. Boredom is a dangerous thing. One philosopher wrote at length about it, saying among other things that it is like a bird of prey hovering over us, ready to fall whenever it sees a life secure from need. Well, my life was pretty secure from need. My wife was the big wage earner in our family. I had few wants and what is more, I knew it. Writing stories was about all I did in those years—even wrote a couple of novels, too.

Joe's proposal had begun to pique my interest. Maybe there was a good story here to write. I guess that is what propelled me on with this bizarre project. But I wondered if he would do it. How far would he go with this? So I said, "Let's do it. I have a month off."

Now I knew for sure that it was not financial difficulties motivating Joe. For he once admitted he had \$112,000 in his checking account, and I knew from earlier conversations that his net worth was over \$1.2 million, most of it in cash. Joe must have been frugal all his life to accumulate so much, although he now indulged his two grown children with \$10,000 per year, the maximum allowed without a tax penalty. \$10,000 a year is a generous figure, but for a man as well-heeled as Joe, it was modest.

Joe was meticulous in preventive health care for himself. Provided Medicare covered it, he partook of all the recommended tests for a man his age, and he took advantage of free flu shots each fall. I doubt if he would have paid the \$35 out-of-pocket for it.

Soon we were in agreement that we would jump off the Golden Gate Bridge. We had only to discuss the particulars. I knew without asking that Joe would not be willing to pay all the expenses of getting to California. Joe had a new Toyota pickup truck. He bought new vehicles with some regularity these days, but this was the first time he favored Toyota over Chevrolet. The change was indicative of Joe's discouragement with what was happening in America. Or so he said. An ardent Democrat, he thought the election of the first George Bush did not bode well for the future. We disagreed mightily about politics.

When I told Joe that I would go on this venture, I expected that he would be taken aback and immediately make an excuse as to why he could not do so. He didn't, though. His response was matter-of-fact, saying only, "Good. I am glad you see the wisdom of my idea. Life is an obvious evil." He added, "and we can only anticipate as a cure for the planet its eventual conversion into a black polished cinder." Even then though, I expected the plan would be ditched. Yet somehow, the planning slowly proceeded, and events largely took over, crazy as that sounds.

One day when Joe appeared at my house to finish a bit of inside painting in my wife's office, I noticed he had installed on his pickup a canopy over the bed. When I remarked on it, he quipped, "Well, the dog can't be uncomfortable on the trip. He would bake in the sun and be a mess when we got there."

"Kelly is a she, Joe," I pointed out, and not for the first time. He never got that part right.

Funny, I thought, Joe's concern to have the dog be comfortable for the ride to California. I guess it firmed up a notion in my brain that when it came right down to it, Joe would not take the plunge. I mean, here was this often grumpy disagreeable guy, cynical to a fault, but at the same time very exacting about his own health (and cheap as can be about it as well). Yet this same guy was telling me he was ready to leap off the Golden Gate Bridge with me and my collie dog. It was almost impossible for me to believe. Yet he was talking now about a special harness which he thought he could make for the dog, and how he pictured all three of us being connected somehow with a cord or a rope. The plan was moving right along.

I knew a lot about Joe. He was Irish Catholic, and grew up around Cincinnati, Ohio. His father was a house painter same as Joe, and his mother herself had committed suicide. She drank drain cleaner, a particularly brutal way to go, we both agreed. She'd had cervical cancer at the time.

Joe was divorced and didn't seem to have much interest in women. His ex-wife had been some sort of mail-order bride from Mexico.

As to his taste in writers, Joe found D.H. Lawrence a bore, but he liked Melville,

and he liked the Argentine writer Borges as well as Samuel Beckett and Paul Bowles. Anything lighter or less gloomy was not to Joe's liking. And humor, well, that was completely out of the question. Joe found no humor in life.

Once, in a moment of brutal honesty, Joe told me he regretted not aborting his two children. To have such a thought is one thing, I told him, but to utter it, that strikes me as just plain senseless. He also told me that when the kids were young he took them to only two movies. One was *Silence of the Lambs*, and the other, its sequel.

One evening Joe called me at home to say he would be over soon if that was convenient. I said, "Sure, come ahead." He arrived, bringing with him a sheaf of papers listing statistics on bridge suicides. But he had a larger purpose in coming.

"Look," he said, "we don't need to go all the way to the Golden Gate to jump. There is a much higher bridge close by in West Virginia, eight-hundred and seventy-six feet, no less.

"Golden Gate is romantic, I admit," he continued, "but there are plenty of maybe better places to jump, West Virginia being only one of them. All around the Grand Canyon works pretty well. Then there is the Beechey Head Cliffs in England, one-thousand feet or more, where they have sometimes two or three jumpers in one day." He went on and on. "Only 2.2% of Americans jump to their deaths. Gunshot is the preferred mode. Americans like violence. Your friend at work who ordered up the commercial tank of helium may have had the best idea." I had told him of a man I knew who killed himself using helium.

And Joe continued. He had Golden Gate statistics galore. "Height rail to water, 250 feet. Fatality rate, 98%. Female rate, 44%. White race or Asian, 98%. Fall time, four seconds. Body velocity hitting the water, 75 miles per hour. How many suicides at the Golden Gate? No one really knows because many jump at night. Corpses not recovered. Bodies out with the tide. We will have to decide what we prefer, day or night."

Should we ask the dog, I wondered, but did not say it. Joe, as I said, has no sense of humor.

"I think I like night," he said. Then he looked at Kelly. "The dog may prefer that, too."

I had the notion in my head that jumpers off the Golden Gate somehow clambered up on the superstructure. With a lame collie dog, that seemed damn near impossible.

"No," Joe said with a deprecating laugh, as if to say, how could I be so stupid as to think such a thing? "People walk out on the sidewalks like normal folks and go over the rail. They would never suspect us with a dog. To climb upon the superstructure would attract attention, invite crowds and interference by the police. The average suicide is not that stupid.

"Remarkable people, suicides. He or she is usually someone desperately ill with cancer or AIDS or is very elderly, without funds or something of that sort who does not want to submit themselves to the doubtful mercy of hospitals, and wants to cut a bad story short. Probably many of them don't believe in Jesus, Allah, etc., and only want permanent peace and oblivion." I noticed Joe favored the word *oblivion*.

Joe certainly had thought about the subject and had done his homework. I thought it curious, maybe because I am a psychiatric social worker, that he didn't mention mental illness as a contributing factor in suicide. Perhaps he thought that mental state was too obvious a contributing factor, that severe depression or other such illness was a given. I didn't bother to interject it. After all, it was Joe's baby, even though I had signed on and had signed on my dog as well. Poor unsuspecting Kelly.

"You think this will work all right for the dog?" he asked as he showed me a crude harness he had put together. "Shall we try it on?" We did so and it fit fine.

“I think West Virginia makes more sense,” Joe opined. “It is so much closer, and the bridge so much higher, and access is easier. Golden Gate, because of its fame for jumpers, has a lot of self-appointed do-gooders trying to thwart the will of the people.”

The next week Joe mailed me a newspaper clipping and the simple message, “The more I consider it, the more I favor the West Virginia location. What do you think?” The clipping he enclosed was about the New River Gorge Bridge. Once a year on Bridge Day parachute jumpers, dozens of them, leap off the structure. It is that high. This particular year, one veteran parachuter jumped and died. Speculation was that he deployed his chute too late, but Joe speculated it was suicide. Noting his age was sixty-six, he ventured,

“Probably he had an incurable illness.” Joe favored incurable illness as a reason to kill yourself.

The deceased was from California, according to the newspaper account, and he was known for jumping from fixed structures since 1966, when he and a friend became the first jumpers off El Capitan, a rock formation nearly 3000 feet high in Yosemite National Park. Jumping continued that day in West Virginia after the man’s body was taken away.

So it was to be Fayetteville, West Virginia and the New River Gorge Bridge where we would make, as Joe termed it, “Our Leap to Oblivion.” I still had trouble believing he was serious. There had always been a side of Joe I had seen as fraudulent. He just struck me as the sort of man who at the hour of his death, in bed after a long illness perhaps, would be calling for a priest to hear his confession. I recall Hemingway had an incident in one of his novels where an atheist character at the last moment suddenly recanted. That’s how I viewed Joe. He seemed, despite his talk to the contrary, to cling to life rather tenaciously, so I didn’t see him jumping off any 1000 foot bridge. Shit, I thought, I was more likely to step over the edge than was Joe Franklin.

Nevertheless, it was one warm Saturday afternoon in August that we started off for West Virginia in Joe’s new Toyota pickup truck with Kelly in the bed of the truck. Joe had provided some old blankets for her to lie on.

The ride was long and hot. It should have been a two-day journey, but Joe was having none of my idea to stop at a motel, so I was somewhat bleary-eyed when we finally reached the bridge at Fayetteville. When I saw the sign for Fayetteville, a woman I once knew from Fayetteville, Arkansas named Liz came to mind. We’d met in the years we worked together on an Indian Reservation in South Dakota. Some years after the reservation experience I visited Liz in Arkansas (or was it Texas?). I was on my way to Mexico. She invited me to sleep with her, which I declined to do. I hadn’t wanted to do so when I knew her in South Dakota and I didn’t wish to do so now. I just could not picture myself with her. I don’t recall ever refusing such an offer before or since, but then too, I don’t recall many such direct offers either. It didn’t occur to me at the time, but I now thought how Liz must have felt being rejected. It was an odd thought for me to be having as I made my way to Oblivion.

Joe liked to quote the philosopher Schopenhauer saying among other things, “Of how many of a man may it not be said that hope made a fool of him until he danced into the arms of Death!” Or that human life must be some kind of mistake. According to Joe, when a man’s needs are satisfied, all that he obtains is a state of painlessness, where nothing remains to him but abandonment to boredom. This is direct proof, Joe argued by way of Schopenhauer I am sure, that existence has no real value in itself; for what is boredom but the feeling of the emptiness of life, and so on. He spoke in this vein for much of the trip.

Had it been up to Joe, we would not have even stopped to eat. We would eat on

the run, in the truck, peanut butter and crackers and perhaps sardines, what Joe had eaten for lunch for years while painting houses. He could easily afford, and I suppose I could have too, to stop at the better restaurants along the route, but we didn't. We ate at places like McDonalds, plentiful and cheap. We split the cost of the fuel and the food. Although I packed dog food for Kelly, she didn't eat much. Besides, Joe insisted on tossing her a burger about every time we stopped. She wasn't used to that kind of food, although she certainly loved it. But I knew too much of the McDonalds fare was not going to agree with her. I didn't say anything, however. Shit, I kept thinking, the dog is going to die, all of us are if we continue the way we are going now, if we stick to Joe's plan.

I half expected this time together to be a sort of celebration for Joe, but he was his usual glum self and all business at hand. There was never a party atmosphere around Joe in the past, and there wasn't now for sure.

We got to the bridge when it was just getting light. And what a magnificently high bridge it was! There was not a soul around. It had taken us nine hours, with Joe doing all the driving. He should have been exhausted too, but he didn't seem so. There was not a car in sight and no other jumpers or would-be jumpers in view. No dogs, either. We parked in the middle of the expanse and Joe set about making preparations. I just sat quietly for a few minutes in the cab of the truck contemplating, I suppose, what was to happen next. I hadn't slept much. One hardly would under the circumstances. Joe was totally silent as he worked. I didn't see that there was all that much to do. Harness the dog and attach her by ropes to us and go over the rail. Of course, we would have to put the dog over the rail first, and I didn't expect there was much room on the other side. No standing space. Bridges aren't constructed for the convenience of jumpers.

I could not quite imagine getting the dog to stand on the edge of such a precipice while we climbed over and all jumped together. Could be something of a challenge, I thought. Though the railing wasn't very high.

Our immediate problem, however, was that since our last stop to let the dog piss Kelly had become sick. Those hamburgers had at last got to her and she was a mess, covered with vomit, which was one thing, but also diarrhea on her rear too, and the back of Joe's truck was pretty foul. And Kelly with all that collie hair had gathered more of each from the truck bed. She was a disaster. The condition of Joe's truck was disastrous too, but then reality must have sunk in. He must have thought, What difference is it going to make anyway? He wouldn't have to clean up the mess. With the help of Joe, Kelly stumbled off the back of the truck. Actually, Joe had to carry her off, not a pleasant task to say the least. But he did it without complaining and began to attach the harness to the poor soiled dog. In the better light I could see what a mess she really was, walking unsteadily, and the loose stool not yet at an end, either. And stink, my God, did she ever stink!

I almost laughed, but Joe was perfectly serious. He was busy putting the harness on the dog. I would have liked a photograph of the scene. Eventually he got it on and was ready to attach one end of the rope to his own belt. I was by now studying that rail, for it suddenly looked higher than I had at first thought. I imagined what it was going to be like to try to pick up the dog and put her over the railing on a small concrete lip on the other side. Joe was about to lift her over the railing. He needed only to hook the remaining piece of rope to my belt.

All I can say is there must be cameras on that bridge to foil fools like us because soon a police cruiser appeared on both ends of the bridge. And here we stood with ropes everywhere and a very smelly dog in a harness. I guess it was clear what we were planning to do, but then maybe not, because one of the officers, a woman of

about fifty got out of the cruiser and asked, “Now what in the world do you fellows have in mind? And what did you do to that poor dog?” She approached Kelly but then thought better of it and backed away. The other three officers, who were men, also had emerged from the police cruisers, but she appeared to be in charge. The officers all seemed good-natured, maybe even trying to contain their mirth at the sight we must have made on that bridge. There was no lying to the police, and Joe didn’t even try. We were thwarted by the self-appointed do-gooders, Joe might have said later, but he didn’t. Joe is a very formal and lawful person, honest and polite, and so he simply explained our plan, rationally, I suppose you would say, to the several incredulous police officers gathered in the middle of the New River Gorge Bridge.

“And the smelly dog, you were I hope taking him with you, sir?” one officer asked. That question was followed by laughter by the others, even the woman in charge.

“Well, not today, Mr. Franklin,” the woman said to us. Joe had identified himself to her. “We got other plans for you. But I don’t know what to do with the dog, hose him down, I suppose.”

I had been silent up to that time but I finally spoke up and argued that we were done for this day and we fully intended to abandon our plan and go back to Kentucky. They bought my explanation, but I figure they knew they couldn’t arrest us and drive off and leave the dog. Besides, Joe looked pretty raggedy himself. I must have seemed fairly reasonable in my presentation because they told us to leave the area and not come back, and that’s exactly what we did. So I guess it could be said that Kelly kept us from jumping off that West Virginia bridge, and as if that were not enough, she kept us from getting arrested.

I tell myself these days I was just along on this adventure to see how far Joe would go. Well, I have come to the conclusion that Joe would have jumped if Kelly hadn’t gotten ill from all those hamburgers Joe fed her along the way. I doubt if Joe would have persuaded me to go over the railing, but I can’t say that with total certainty. One never can in such circumstances.

I see Joe seldom these days and he never speaks of what happened, or almost happened, at the Fayetteville Bridge. He continues to paint houses and this past summer he put a new roof on his own house.

The cost of having a roofer do it, he said, was \$5,000 and Joe would not stand for that extravagant expense, even though, as I said in the beginning, he must have nearly \$2,000,000 in savings these days. When I see Joe, I never bring up the subject of the bridge leap plan, and he does not mention it either. Neither does he write me nearly so often and, when he does, he doesn’t mention bridges at all.

Nobody in my family ever heard any of this account, and I like to believe that is for the better. Kelly is long gone of course. Her cremated remains are in my back yard and I have placed a stone where I buried her ashes. I didn’t know this, but when you cremate an animal you can choose to have a single cremation as in the case of a dog, or a multi-dog cremation. I chose the single cremation and paid a premium for this service, but I wonder if I got what I paid for. Do they really do single dog cremations? Joe, I know, would have gone for the multi-dog price—the cheaper rate—even though he did seem to like that collie dog Kelly, though he couldn’t remember if Kelly was a he or a she. Hardly matters now, does it?