

The Falls

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The Gatekeeper's Testimony:

12 June 1950

At the time unknown, unnamed, the individual who was to throw himself into the Horseshoe Falls appeared to the gatekeeper of the Goat Island Suspension Bridge at approximately 6:15 A.M. He would be the first pedestrian of the day.

Could I tell, right away? Not exactly. But looking back, yes I should have known. Might've saved him if I had.

So early! The hour should have been dawn except that shifting walls of fog, mist, and spray rising in continuous billowing clouds out of the 180-foot Niagara Gorge obscured the sun. The season should have been early summer except, near The Falls, the air was agitated and damp, abrasive as fine steel filings in the lungs.

The gatekeeper surmised that the strangely hurrying distracted individual had come directly through Prospect Park from one of the old stately hotels on Prospect Street. The gatekeeper observed that the individual had a “young-old pinched face”—“wax-doll skin”—“sunken, kind of glaring eyes.” His wire-rimmed glasses gave him an

impatient schoolboy look. At six feet he was lanky, lean, “slightly round-shouldered like he’d been stooping over a desk all his life.” He hurried purposefully yet blindly, as if somebody was calling his name. His clothes were conservative, somber, nothing a typical Niagara Falls tourist would be wearing. A white cotton dress shirt open at the throat, unbuttoned dark coat and trousers with a jammed zipper “like the poor guy had gotten dressed real fast, in the dark.” The man’s shoes were dress shoes, black leather polished “like you’d wear to a wedding, or a funeral.” His ankles shone waxy-white, sockless.

No socks! With fancy shoes like that. A giveaway.

The gatekeeper called out, “Hello!” but the man ignored him. Not just he was blind but deaf, too. Anyway not hearing. You could see his mind was fixed like a bomb set to go off: he had somewhere to get to, fast.

In a louder voice the gatekeeper called out, “Hey, mister: tickets are fifty cents,” but again the man gave no sign of hearing. In the arrogance of desperation he seemed oblivious of the very tollbooth. He was nearly running now, not very gracefully, and swaying, as if the suspension bridge was tilting beneath him. The bridge was about five feet above the white-water rapids and its plank floor was wet, treacherous; the man gripped the railing to keep his balance and haul himself forward. His smooth-soled shoes skidded. He wasn’t accustomed to physical exercise. His shiny round glasses slipped on his face and would have fallen if he hadn’t shoved them against the bridge of his nose. His mouse-colored hair, thinning at the waxen crown of his head, blew in wan, damp tendrils around his face.

By this time the gatekeeper had decided to leave his tollbooth to follow the agitated man. Calling, “Mister! Hey mister!”—“Mister, wait!” He’d had experience with suicides in the past. More times than he wished to remember. He was a thirty-year veteran of The Falls tourist trade. He was in his early sixties, couldn’t keep up with the younger man. Pleading, “Mister! Don’t! God damn I’m begging you: *don’t!*”

He should have dialed his emergency number, back in the tollbooth. Now it was too late to turn back.

Once on Goat Island the younger man didn’t pause by the railing

to gaze across the river at the Canadian shore, nor did he pause to contemplate the raging, tumultuous scene, as any normal tourist would do. He didn't pause even to wipe his streaming face, or brush his straggly hair out of his eyes. *Under the spell of The Falls. Nobody mortal was going to stop him.*

But you have to interfere, or try. Can't let a man—or a woman—commit suicide, the unforgiveable sin, before your staring eyes.

The gatekeeper, short of breath, light-headed, limped after the younger man shouting at him as he made his unerring way to the southern tip of the little island, Terrapin Point, above the Horseshoe Falls. The most treacherous corner of Goat Island, as it was the most beautiful and enthralling. Here the rapids go into a frenzy. White frothy churning water shooting up fifteen feet into the air. Hardly any visibility. The chaos of a nightmare. The Horseshoe Falls is a gigantic cataract a half-mile long at its crest, three thousand tons of water pouring over the Gorge each second. The air roars, shakes. The ground beneath your feet shakes. As if the very earth is beginning to come apart, disintegrate into particles, down to its molten center. As if time has ceased. Time has exploded. As if you've come too near to the radiant, thrumming, mad heart of all being. Here, your veins, arteries, the minute precision and perfection of your nerves will be unstrung in an instant. Your brain, in which you reside, that one-of-a-kind repository of *you*, will be pounded into its chemical components: brain cells, molecules, atoms. Every shadow and echo of every memory erased.

Maybe that's the promise of The Falls? The secret?

Like we're sick of ourselves. Mankind. This is the way out, only a few have the vision.

Thirty yards from the younger man, the gatekeeper saw him place one foot on the lowest rung of the railing. A tentative foot, on the slippery wrought iron. But the man's hands gripped the top rung, both fists, tight,

“Don't do it! Mister! God damn—”

The gatekeeper's words were drowned out by The Falls. Flung back into his face like cold spit.

Near to collapsing, himself. This would be his last summer at

Goat Island. His heart hurt, pounding to send oxygen to his stunned brain. And his lungs hurt, not only the stinging spray of the river but the strange metallic taste of the air of the industrial city sprawling east and north of The Falls, in which the gatekeeper had lived all his life. *You wear out. You see too much. Every breath hurts.*

The gatekeeper would afterward swear he'd seen the younger man make a gesture of farewell in the instant before he jumped: a mock salute, a salute of defiance, as a bright brash schoolboy might make to an elder, to provoke; yet a sincere farewell too, as you might make to a stranger, a witness to whom you mean no harm, whom you wish to absolve of the slightest shred of guilt he might feel, for allowing you to die when he might have saved you.

And in the next instant the young man, who'd been commandeering the gatekeeper's exclusive attention, was simply—gone.

In a heartbeat, gone. Over the Horseshoe Falls.

Not the first of the poor bastards I've seen, but God help me he will be the last.

When the distraught gatekeeper returned to his booth to dial Niagara County Emergency Services, the time was 6:26 A.M., approximately one hour after dawn.