

Equinox Society Radio 006

My Dear Strangers,

Two weeks ago, society member Hank Ridley sent a report about a strange fatality, or rather a series of fatalities, that he couldn't personally verify because he's currently on the other side of the country.

Hank's been in New Mexico, vacationing with his boyfriend and investigating a handful of local mysteries, including a veterinarian who claims to be in possession of a live ouroboros. A typical Hank vacation, in other words.

I'm told they're having a good trip, despite daily arguments over how to spend their time. Hank's enthusiastic about occult reporting, his boyfriend's enthusiastic about Pueblo Revival architecture, and they both dislike each other's primary interests. All vacation, they fight in the mornings, go their separate ways, get their respective fills of mythical snakes and adobe-style buildings, and then affectionately reunite in the evenings. According to Hank, the daily fights and separations have made them appreciate the nights more than usual. He is concerned about the frequency of their arguments, though.

But going back to Hank's report: It's about an unidentified man leaping to his death off a train trestle. What makes it of special interest to us is that the man has leapt to his death at least a dozen times.

This is Equinox Society Radio, and I'm a stranger. Like you.

Hank writes:

Dear Dennis,

I've received word of a man who fatally jumps off a train trestle in rural New Jersey at least once a month.

The man has been seen taking his suicide dive—a two-hundred-foot drop into a rocky gorge—by more than a dozen witnesses in the last year.

Witnesses describe the man as approximately thirty-years-old and six-feet-tall. He's Caucasian with long black hair that three people have independently described with such superlatives as "marvelous" and "fabulous". He wears a gray sweatsuit and blue Adidas sneakers.

The man has been seen at different times of the day—never at night—jogging east to west from a heavily wooded section of the tracks. He stops and faces north in the middle of the trestle, where he stands for several minutes, staring into the distance, before removing his sweatshirt's hood and shaking out his curly hair. Then he jumps off the trestle, without drama or panache, and falls two hundred feet to his death.

There are apparently no easily accessible vantage points from which to see his body hit the rocks, and by the time anyone is able to descend into the gorge, no trace of him remains. Search teams combed the area after the first few sightings, but no one in the area bothers anymore.

Every witness has seen him from a distance, usually from a narrow road that runs along the western side of the gorge. The site has become a popular macabre attraction, and local high-schoolers frequent the site to drink and wait for the spectacle to reoccur, but the jumper has yet to appear when anyone was in a position to approach or speak to him.

The most recent incident happened on Thursday, June 6th, at 9:45 A.M. The woman who saw him jump had seen him once before, last October, and became the first person to witness his suicide twice.

The woman noticed an additional detail the second time. When the man removed his hood, his curly hair appeared to slide backwards on his skull. When he mussed it up, as people often do after removing a hood, his hair looked normal again. Might the jumper be different people wearing identical wigs and outfits? But how do they survive and vanish, and what is the purpose?

I understand Claire is currently in New Jersey. I've sent her the details and location of the trestle and hope she's able to investigate.

Sincerely,
Hank

P.S. Corey and I spent the whole day together in Santa Fe, exploring a Pueblo Revival home that is, serendipitously, haunted by triplet sisters. A good day for both of us.

Glad to hear Hank and Corey enjoyed some quality overlap on their vacation.

But his report on the trestle jumper disturbs me more than most of our usual stories. I'll explain why later in the broadcast.

For now, I'll hand things over to society member Claire Maple. Claire her own share of demons, external and internal, and was the perfect person to go and get some answers. Here's the first of two emails she sent.

Hey, it's Claire.

I'm in Depressingly-Nowhere County, investigating that trestle jumper Hank emailed about. His report was slightly off location-wise. The trestle is actually in Pennsylvania, not New Jersey, but it's so close to the border that half the witnesses I've talked to are New Jerseyites and the other half are Pennsylvanians.

The trestle was built in 1949 and stands a nauseating two-hundred feet over a weedy, rocky gorge that's impossible to easily access unless you're one of those weirdoes who loves hiking into gorges full of ticks and faded Genesee Cream Ale cans. The trestle's been closed to all traffic, including pedestrian, for over a decade. It's basically the kind of rusty old death structure you'd associate with teenage dares and Pennsylvania industrial decay.

A massive graffiti tag on the northern side reads—"HEAVY METAL HEART". Which is my favorite Sky Ferreira song. But the tag is so weathered, I think it really dates back to some boombox-carrying Dio fan in the 80s. I'm filled with dreadlove-nostalgia from just how much this entire place reminds me of my adolescence, right down to the lousy beer cans.

I spent three mornings and afternoons sitting in my car with a thermos of coffee, smokes, and protein bars, watching the trestle from the muddy road on the west side of the gorge. Since the sightings are at least once a month, I hoped his actual appearance was more frequent—that sometimes he appeared and jumped and there was simply nobody there to watch.

I got lucky. The mystery jumper appeared out of the woods on the far side of the trestle at 1:21 P.M. on the third day of my watch. I followed him with binoculars, and he was exactly like the description in Hank's report. Thirtysomething, six feet tall, looked fit. Gray sweatsuit with the hood up, blue Adidas sneakers. And yeah, when he stopped in the middle of the trestle and pulled back his hood, his curly black hair was fabulous. It was hair I could imagine grabbing onto.

He looked physical, meaning not a ghost or optical illusion. If his hair was a wig, as Hank suggested, it was a really good wig. The weather was drizzling rain, and I watched his hair dampen and sag while he stood on the trestle's edge, staring off to the north.

My heart was pounding for the guy. He looked confident and calm, but there was something sad and dreamlike about him. Not hypnotized or drugged. Just resigned to what he was doing, like he had, in fact, made his death jump dozens of times before and there he was again. That there was meaning in the act, and some compulsion that drove it, but it would never be a thing he wanted or enjoyed. I know, I know: “What a whip-smart psych assessment of a total stranger after watching a couple minutes through binoculars.” Whatever, it’s what he looked like. Sometimes you just know in a way-too-familiar way, you know?

I got out of my car and yelled, “Hey!” as loud as I could. It took a few seconds for my voice to reach his ears. Incredible timing—he heard me the instant he started to jump and looked in my direction. I met his eyes through my binoculars for one quick second, and let me tell you, it was like a thousand volts, connecting with someone who’s right about to fall two-hundred feet to his death.

I had one those time-warp moments. He fell in slow motion, it was over in a flash, etc. If I watched him do it fifty times, I don’t think I’d ever *not* have the gut-punch sensation of seeing a human fall that far and watermelon open on the rocks.

But from my spot at the car, I lost of sight of him at the end of his fall and couldn’t see where he landed in the gorge. I drove a ways along the road, got out of my car, and climbed a wooded hill to the western end of the trestle. Then I walked across the trestle itself. The structure was rotten and exposed, and there were gaps and breaks and “holy shit, I’m not the daredevil I used to be” sections every few steps. But I reached the middle and got down on my hands and knees and looked over the edge.

No body. No trace. I couldn’t find a single scuff mark on the trestle itself. Even with my vertigo and panic from the height, I felt relieved and even wonderstruck, like someone who’d just seen a grade-A, Las Vegas, resurrection magic trick.

Starting tomorrow, I’m going to wait on the trestle itself. I’ve got to meet this guy.

Later,
Claire

I’m not particularly jaded, dear strangers, but a lot of times I hear about a tragic death and part of me dismisses it as quickly as I can. I think to myself, “That’s sad, I’m sorry they died,” or, “That’s outrageous, gun violence ought to be stopped,” and then—and I’m not proud of this—I whisk it out of my head, go back to my day, and try to make something positive happen before 6 P.M.

Because 6 P.M. is usually when I ask myself, “Did you do anything good today, Dennis, or did you fritter another twenty-four hours, you lazy, selfish asshole?” If the answer is negative, I often lapse into food, or gin, or too much TV, trying not to spiral into a bad headspace where I hate myself, and lose hope, and start getting glimmers of my own sad death. Pro-tip: Lousy self-medication doesn’t help. And the fact that I sometimes do it anyway is one more reason to dislike myself. The spiral gets worse. And before long, I start losing sight of reasons to exist.

I’ve rarely been truly suicidal, but I’ve been close enough, on a number of memorable occasions, to panic and think, “I can’t. I just can’t. I have family and friends. I’ve got a dog. I’ve got to get my shit together now before *they* regret something terrible I’ve done.” And thank God, in those moments, the worst I’ve usually done is punch myself in the head really, really hard.

Not that punching myself in the head is good. I’m not trying to sugarcoat self-abuse. I’m saying that I’ve thought of doing worse, and it’s scared the hell out of me, and every time I read about a suicide, it’s something I can’t whisk out of my thoughts. To quote Claire, it’s something I “just know in a way-too-familiar way.”

Here’s her second email.

Hey, it’s Claire again.

I’ve been here all week, waiting for the jumper. Yesterday I met him.

There’s no road that leads directly to the trestle, so I’ve had to leave my car behind and wait on the trestle itself, with coffee and smokes and egg croissant sandwiches, reading a book on a lawnchair in this godawful neverending humid mist that’s apparently the only weather Depressingly-Nowhere, Pennsylvania ever gets. It never quite rains, it never quite clears enough to dry me out. It’s impossible to tell where the air ends and my sweat begins. Between my cigarettes and the humidity, I’ve felt like I’m breathing with my lungs full of glue.

But anyway, so here’s the big scene—four days into my vigil, and I’m about to slog back to my hotel for a long cool shower, when the guy reappears.

Same as before, jogging from the woods on the opposite side of the trestle. He’s wearing the same gray sweatsuit and blue sneaks, and I start walking out to meet him in the middle, at the spot he always jumps from.

My legs are numb from sitting so long and I’m walking off-balance. I stumble once and my arm goes right through a gap between the crossties, and this rusty chunk of metal tumbles into the

gorge. It's like something out of an old jungle movie with an ancient bridge suspended over Certain Death, etc.

But I've got to meet this guy before he swan-dives again, and so I'm up and almost running to meet him in time. He sees me coming but doesn't break stride. He reaches his jumping spot before I do, takes his hood off, and shakes out his curly black hair. Even thirty feet away, I can tell he's hot as fuck. The kind of startling handsome man who'd walk into a restaurant and have the whole place twittering, because everybody would assume he's a celebrity they can't quite identify.

And so I'm running toward him, and I have this vision of tackling him and pinning him on the tracks to prevent him from jumping. He'd struggle but then surrender, and he'd be so amazed by this sexy Samaritan who finally saved his life, he'd just stare at my face until I kissed him on the mouth, and then we'd make out on the crossties a while, with the trestle crumbling underneath us, and finally I'd take him back to my hotel and we'd shower together and fall into bed and maul each other like near-death survivors.

Not even kidding, that entire scene flashes through my head in seconds, and then I'm suddenly at his side, close enough to tackle him for real. He's turned away from me and faced north, gazing into the distance like he's totally alone. I'm panting and disheveled and I stand there, a foot away, staring at his face.

"Thanks for trying to help," he says. "I don't mean to freak anyone out."

His voice is calm and quiet—a bedroom voice.

I say, "Who are you?"

He says, "I wanted to kill myself and did, right here, just like this. And it's exactly like people say—at the last second, you regret it. You wish you hadn't jumped. I don't remember hitting the rocks. I jumped, and fell, and then I was home again. I was positive I'd dreamt it all. I'd never been more relieved."

The whole time he's telling me this, he's inching his Adidas closer to the edge.

"Then what are you doing here again?" I ask.

"I get this feeling in my body like I'm already dead," he says. "Like somehow I died but my body kept living. It goes away for a while, but it always comes back."

I still can't tell if I'm talking to a person or a phantom. I worry if I touch him and he's real, he'll take his header into the gorge before we finish talking.

"Everybody feels dead sometimes," I say.

“Not like this.”

“So you keep coming here to kill yourself?”

“I keep coming here to resurrect myself,” he says.

Which is either corny as hell or a pretty good line. I decide it’s corny as hell, but what am I supposed to do? Snort and roll my eyes at someone who’s about to kill himself for the umpteenth time?

I do get what he’s talking about. The jump makes him feel immortal, or super-awesomely mortal, or whatever you call the rush he’s desperately pursuing. You hear about it with crash survivors, PTSD soldiers, addicts. They get a death-defying high and everything’s so alive, but then their ordinary time is lifeless and depressing.

I want to tell him to quit the melodrama and come back to my hotel so we can tie one on and roll around like good old-fashioned debaucherous escape artists.

Instead I say, “Well you *are* freaking people out. You’ve got teens watching sometimes. You’ll give them bad ideas, like they should jump, too.”

Then I get this sense that I’ve been talking to myself. Other people have seen him, but maybe he’s a mass delusion, like when those Belgian schoolkids all got sick after drinking ordinary soda because one of the kids thought the soda smelled funny.

I poke the guy’s arm. His sweatshirt’s damp, his shoulder’s solid, and I’m about to say, “Huh,” when he steps off the trestle. My “huh” comes out like “ho!”—like a breathy “huh-no!”—and I have this sickening feeling that my tiny little poke pushed him off the edge.

I watch him go, one foot first and tipping forward as he falls. It’s like my heart falls with him. I don’t mean that sentimentally—I mean my shock and dizziness are so intense, I have this physical sensation that my heart has dropped out of my chest, and I’m going to collapse and die the second he hits the rocks.

I guess I flutter out. I blink or almost faint. I see him falling, falling... And then he’s gone. Not a trace of his body in the gorge. I can still feel the moisture from his sweatshirt on my finger. I can even smell a hint of something he was wearing. His body wash, maybe, or a sport-scent deodorant.

I stare a while at the rocks below, and then I back away and sit on the crossties until my breathing calms down and I have balance when I stand again. There’s nothing else to do but walk back, grab my lawnchair and book, and go back to my hotel. I drive in a daze. The humidity makes everything soft and squishy. It’s like video-game driving, hyper-real but hyper-fake, like I

could drive into the trees and just bounce off with pixelated damage, no big deal.

I get back to my room and belt a plastic cup full of gin. I turn the TV on so there's background noise, and then I take a long shower until my body feels like a body again.

I try to nap but it's only three in the afternoon, and the sun is finally out, and I'm ridiculously wired in spite of the gin. I keep getting a bad falling sensation in my stomach, and the TV's only making me lonelier, so I get dressed and go to a bar for a cheeseburger and some ordinary conversation. I pick up a thirty-year-old electrician with a mustache and fuck him as hard as I can until the falling sensation finally goes away. I sleep like a dead woman. I wake up feeling good, really stabilized and solid.

I'm getting out of here today before the humidity makes it hard to breathe. I hate this place, Dennis. It's been a sad, dispiriting week here. But I do have this nagging sense that I'll eventually be back. That somehow or other, I'll see that fucking trestle again.

Later,
Claire

I hope the mystery jumper's OK. I hope he finds a better way to keep himself going.

Repetitive self-wreckage has a way of sneaking up on me. I'll plan a week of exercise, work, healthy eating, and positive outlooks on my social life and self-worth. By Wednesday night, I'm having booze and potato chips, wondering why I haven't heard from so-and-so, and depriving myself of sleep to watch something that doesn't make me feel a whole lot better. Here's the killer part, though—I go just far enough into pissing my whole week away that the following morning, I bounce back and have a great day. And then I get it into my head that the positive day was fueled by regretting my negative behavior the night before. I start believing I *need* the self-wreckage in order to thrive.

There are darker versions of all this, of course. Some of you might know them. If you're somebody who feels the trestle jumper's impulse, you aren't alone. You aren't broken or weird. An incredible number of people understand it, and some of them can help. Ask for help. Try therapy. Try Tarot cards. Try a relative or friend. Or try a suicide hotline if you need it. They're not as scary as they seem.

Please, dear stranger. If you're in a bad loop, try something different. Anything's better than jogging onto that trestle.

Equinox Society Radio is produced by Dennis Mahoney. New episodes appear sporadically.

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Our three-note theme is played by Jack Mahoney.

Imagine our closing song is "Medicine" by Daughter.

Until next time, dear strangers... take care and look beyond.