

## THE BRIDGE

By Jim Wisneski

The scream of the wind ripped past Ricky Tucker as his body flew almost lifeless to the cold, dark water below. With each passing second, the rocks became bigger, sharper, almost like teeth, waiting patiently for Ricky's arrival. His breaths of air became more and more difficult to take. Ricky figured that by this point, he would have regretted his decision to jump. But the jump was the best choice Ricky had ever made. He threw his arms open, closed his eyes, and smiled; only a few more seconds. . .

Ricky jumped back and grabbed the metal braces on the bridge and screamed. His eyes slowly opened as he realized he hadn't jumped yet. A soft breeze kicked by him and made leaves dance across the old bridge. A half crescent moon hung from the sky, complete with a few stars and a thin wisp of clouds; a perfect fall night.

As Ricky's scream finally halted, he took a few deep breaths and began to cry. His head bobbed up and down like a tree branch in the wind. He never imagined himself dying like this. His wife seemed distant, his daughter already lost; all Ricky wanted was something, or someone.

"Damn cold out here, isn't it?" a voice bellowed from behind Ricky.

Snapping out of his trance, Ricky spun to greet the stranger.

"Too cold to be standing here, on a bridge," the stranger said. The stranger's voice almost has a slight Southern accent to it. The man slowly walked up to Ricky as his breath danced around him in the cold air. The stranger appeared in his forties. He had black hair with a touch of gray swimming through that complemented his thick flannel shirt. Rick caught a strong hint of both Old Spice and musk.

“Name’s Charles Wood. Friends call me Woodie.” The man extended his hand.

Unprepared for conversation, Ricky accepted the shake and nodded. There was an odd dampness to Charles Wood’s hand.

“Got a name, stranger?”

Licking his lips and swallowing hard, Ricky told the man his name.

“Rick,” Woodie said, chuckling, “I had a brother named Rick.”

Had a brother? Ricky thought.

Ricky surveyed the area and thought it odd that the stranger didn’t seem to have a vehicle.

“Rick, what are you doing up here on this bridge anyway?”

Ricky had no answer prepared. His mind was occupied with thoughts and memories of his wife, teenage daughter, and a life that failed him.

“Why are you up here?” Ricky asked.

“Oh, just passing by. I love these cold nights. The air flows right through ya, straight to the bone.”

Ricky shivered in the cold air, trying to figure out why the man seemed so mysterious. It felt as if an aura surrounded him. Something peaceful, but something hidden.

Woodie let out a slow breath and sat down on the ledge of bridge. He waved Ricky down and continued his conversation.

“You know, Rick, I stood up here once, ready to jump,” Woodie said. His quiet tone sent a chill through Ricky’s body.

“What makes you think I’m up here to commit suicide?” Ricky retorted. Was it that obvious that Ricky wanted to die? A complete stranger could read him like a newspaper. Ricky

knew he could combat that problem; how well can a newspaper be read once it has been drowned in water?

“About a year ago, I came up here. Almost like this night here, too damn cold to be on a bridge,” Woodie went on. “I watched the water flow, listened to the water hit the rocks, but all I heard were the laughs of my children.”

Woodie wiped his cheek and looked away from Ricky. Was the stranger now crying?

“Got any kids, Rick?” Woodie stared deep into the night sky, almost as if he was concentrating towards the moon.

Ricky slowly turned his head to face the question. “Just one. A daughter named Leanne.”

Woodie nodded his head in approval. Ricky still felt a sense of amazement at the fact that a stranger had chosen to walk down this isolated road on this particular night. Maybe Ricky wasn't as alone as he once thought.

“Kids are everything. Rick, what does your daughter look like?”

The words hit Ricky like a rusted dagger. There wasn't much to think of besides the black lines running down his daughter's cheek as she sat at the kitchen table begging her way out of being seventeen and pregnant.

Ricky watched his legs dangle from the edge of the bridge and concentrated on the water many feet below him. After a few seconds, it almost felt like time slowed down. He could see each small wave crash against a rock, and almost feel the sound of the water. The sound of his bones crunching against the rocks made his nerves jump.

“Did you hear me, Rick?” Woodie asked.

“Yeah, I did.”

“Well?”

“Well. . . it has been a long time since anyone has asked me that,” Ricky started out in a quiet voice. He felt nervous and embarrassed that he couldn’t answer the question. “She is seventeen. We recently found out that she is pregnant by some kid she. . .”

“Congratulations, Grandpa!” Woodie exclaimed with a great smile, slamming his hand on Ricky’s back. “That’s terrific! You’ll get to have another little one running around the house.”

Ricky stared in disbelief. Woodie actually thought it was a good thing that a young girl – not a woman – was pregnant. A sudden wind of anger came across Ricky and he remembered why he was going to jump.

“She’s only seventeen,” Ricky exploded. “How is that terrific?”

Woodie leaned over, touching shoulders with Ricky. “Rick, let me tell you something. A rose is a beautiful flower. Soft petals, a deep, rich red color. If you stare into the top of it, it almost resembles a maze; an endless maze of beauty. But, that rose has thorns all along the stem, and if you aren’t careful, one of them can get ya. And if it gets ya, it hurts.”

Woodie licked his point finger, acting out being stuck by a thorn.

“That is how life is. It’s a maze. It takes you places you never thought, and in the end, you have two choices. You can either be a dummy and keep grabbing the stem and hurting yourself, or you can admire what counts, the beautiful petals, the color, the feel of the petals. In the end, you know the rose isn’t going to live forever, so why not enjoy it while it’s there?”

Woodie leaned back, rubbing his hands together for warmth. He nodded towards Ricky and became silent.

Ricky looked at his hand and there were no holes from thorns, but he understood what Woodie meant. Deep inside himself – his soul – there were too many wounds from thorns. Was it possible that Ricky just kept his eye out for the worst in life? Did it matter that his job wasn't perfect or that his daughter was pregnant?

“No,” Ricky said aloud.

“Huh?” replied Woodie.

“No, it doesn't matter. This doesn't matter. Not anymore.”

“This is life, Rick. You don't get to pick and choose, trust me, you don't.”

“How do you know . . .”

“Jenny and Bobby,” Woodie broke in.

“Excuse me?”

Reaching into his pocket, Woodie pulled out a picture. “Here,” he said, extending the picture, “these were my children. Jenny and Bobby.”

Ricky took the picture out of Woodie's aged hand. It was, in essence, worn. The corners were worn, bent with one ripped off. The photograph itself seemed years old. On the faded picture were two children throwing a small pile of leaves into the air. The picture revealed their youth as they laughed, enjoying a nice fall afternoon. One was a young boy who looked like a younger version of Woodie, complete with blonde hair and blue eyes. The girl appeared older with had a small face and a tiny, pointed nose. Ricky noticed that the picture that it felt wet, as if it were sitting in water. He handed the damp portrait back to Woodie and smiled.

“Wait, you said ‘were your children’; did something happen?” Ricky asked, slightly confused.

“So what are going to do, Rick?”

The question caught Ricky off guard. “What do you mean?”

Woodie pointed towards the water. “You gonna jump?”

The question echoed through Ricky’s head. He felt ashamed that he was going to turn his back on his wife and daughter – and even his unborn grandchild.

“I don’t think I can do it,” Ricky said. He turned his head, finally smiling, and found he was speaking to nothing but autumn air. He quickly stood up and tried to find Woodie. Ricky turned and found Woodie slowly walking away.

“Leaving so soon?” Ricky yelled.

Woodie stopped, turned, and nodded in his direction.

“I think you can use a few minutes alone before you go home to your family.”

“What makes you think I am going to go home?”

Woodie turned back and continued his journey into the night.

“Do you come up here often?” Ricky yelled.

“Only on nights like these,” replied Woodie.

“Going home to your family?”

“Soon,” Woodie said as his voice disappeared into the night.

In that moment, Ricky could swear he lost sight of the man. It appeared that Woodie had just vanished. Ricky smiled again, into the breeze that made his eyes water. He then reached into his back pocket to retrieve his wallet. Opening it up, Ricky found an old picture of his wife and daughter. He rubbed its surface, reminiscing on those memories that seemed to get lost in time. This picture showed his wife and daughter on the lap of Santa Claus. Ricky remembered going with Leanne to get the picture taken. She was about four at the time and swore that she wasn’t

afraid of Santa. When it came time for the picture to be taken, she burst into tears and required the company of her mother. Ricky chuckled aloud and then threw the picture off the bridge.

“Here’s to the night,” Ricky said as the picture began its long journey with the current of the water. He stood up, took a deep breath, and decided that Woodie was right, he should enjoy his family. Ricky trotted across the bridge, making his way to his vehicle. At the base of the bridge, he tripped over something below him. Ricky stopped and discovered a memorial. He had tripped over a glass candle. Bending down to pick it up, Ricky saw there was a baseball and a teddy bear. Ricky looked at the candle and saw there was a name on it. “Charles Woods,” it said. Quickly, Ricky dropped the candle. It slowly rolled across the pavement until it hit the base of the bridge.

“He jumped,” Ricky said. “He jumped.”

Another breeze picked up and grabbed the candle and rolled it back until it hit Ricky’s ankle. He jumped and looked down at it. This time, underneath the candle there was a picture. Ricky moved the candle and picture up the photograph. He unfolded it and there it was, the picture of his two children that Woodie had shown Ricky a few minutes earlier. On the back, there was a note written from Woodie:

“Rick –

Don’t let them thorns get you too much because the jump is always worse.”

Again, Ricky found himself in tears. He was embarrassed that he almost killed himself and he felt such remorse for Woodie and his family. Trying to imagine what those two children must have gone through was too much for Ricky to handle. He swallowed hard and placed the

candle back where it was. Folding up the picture of Woodie's children, Ricky placed it into the spot in his wallet where the photo he's thrown into the water had been.

“Keep my picture safe,” Ricky said to the night sky, hoping Woodie was listening. Another breeze kicked up and Ricky ran to his vehicle so he could get home and start enjoying life for what it was; a gift.