

—UNDER THE BRIDGE DOWNTOWN

by Gary A. Braunbeck & Matthew Warner

The worst part about his daughter's death wasn't the terror of seeing half a ton of concrete separate from a bridge and smash through their windshield; it wasn't even the deafening crunch when the fragment pulped Jessie's head and sent her blood splattering over his cheek: it was his initial reaction once the shock wore off.

Relief.

Because shame followed that relief. *How do you dare celebrate what happened to her? She's your daughter, you selfish prick.* Then the worse realization: *In a way, you wanted this to happen, didn't you? Maybe even secretly wished for it to happen. All your life you've believed your darkest wishes made in the dead of night come true. It's why Aunt Clare got emphysema when you were six, the spiteful bitch. Always blew her cigarette smoke into your face. You wished she'd die of it, and then she did.*

Jessie's death is your fault.

David Brolin had drowned in these thoughts every day for the past year. Especially now, with the first anniversary approaching, he couldn't stand it. He looked up from stirring the slop in the elementary school cafeteria where he worked and saw fresh-faced little kids grinning at him over the serving line. They held out their cardboard trays for an ice cream scoopful of mashed potatoes. Each kid—each normal, healthy kid—reminded him of peering over this same line and wishing the child looking back was his own. But those wishes never came true. Instead, he'd been stuck with a spasm-wracked pretzel of human flesh.

He'd wanted, hoped that, *prayed for* Jessie's cerebral palsy to improve enough so she could attend this school and stand in line so she could smile at Daddy as he dished out the food. Before she died, David's life was measured not by morning, noon, and night but by caring for Jessie, slinging slop in the cafeteria, and hating his ex-wife for leaving him with this burden. He'd been nothing but an overweight, angry, bearded little man who wore a shower cap half the day.

Then the concrete fell down, manna from Hell, leaving him to quail at the echoes of his own thoughts: *Wish she would just die.*

"You don't look so good, partner," said Ray, the school custodian, when the last lunch shift was over. He rested his chin on his mop handle and watched David's hands shake as he pulled off his shower cap. "Hitting the bottle again?"

David gave the ponytailed man a sharp look. "Just because I used to have a drinking problem doesn't mean I'm always falling off the wagon. You have no right to—"

"Hey, hey, take it easy. Just a little ribbing between friends. That's all."

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David wanted to ask when they became friends. He sighed as he stuffed the cap into his duffel bag and put on his coat to go home.

“Hey, partner, come on. It’s Friday. Why don’t you come down to the docks with me? We’ll, y’know, get us some hookers and start the weekend off right.”

David looked to make sure they were alone. “Are we actually having this conversation?”

He didn’t wait for an answer. Just left. As he settled in behind the wheel minutes later, he marveled that stupid Ray didn’t somehow choke to death on his own ponytail while sleeping.

(Like someone with cerebral palsy? Huh, you walking, talking, breathing pile of shit? Is that what you were going to think next? Better start writing that speech for the Humanitarian of the Year award that’s no doubt coming your way.)

He was distracted enough by his anger and self-loathing that he drove right past the West 25 exit off the highway. Now he would have to drive until he reached the Whipple Road exit. Well, so much the better. Might as well get it all out of his system today.

Because between here and Whipple Road was the bridge that killed Jessie. Nothing like a little drive down Memory Lane.

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Within two months of the accident, David sued the city and the successor to the construction company that built the bridge thirty years ago. It didn’t cost him a dime since his attorney worked on contingency. “This is one of the most clear-cut wrongful-death claims I’ve seen in a long time,” the lawyer said in the beginning, knobby fingers stroking a stack of newspaper accounts of what happened. “It’s negligence *per se*—a great *res ipsa* case. We don’t have to prove anything other than that the bridge fell down.”

Even now, almost a year downstream, it wasn’t over. The city blamed the builders, the builders blamed the engineers, and the engineers blamed the suppliers. The case was continued to give time to find objective evidence of negligence—but no one could explain how it happened. The engineers had designed the bridge flawlessly. The construction company used the best materials. All the codes of the time were observed. Then two months ago, the construction company declared bankruptcy for unrelated reasons, and David’s attorney needed time to ask a bankruptcy court for permission to proceed with the suit. This could drag on for years.

But the part that hurt, really hurt, came during his deposition. A defense lawyer, trying to hide a smirk, looked him in the eyes and said, “Mr. Brolin, the law says you’re entitled to be compensated for the loss of your daughter’s companionship, love, and affection. Can you cite any examples of how your daughter furnished these things to you?”

The best David could come up with was, “Well, she smiled sometimes.”

“I see.” And he quit trying to hide the smirk.

That fucking snake. He *knew*. He knew David’s life wasn’t worse for losing his daughter. The only thing that made it worse was guilt, but admitting that wouldn’t help his case. And dear God, the man was right; he didn’t deserve any compensation for his daughter’s death.