

A BRIDGE TOO FAR

Anti-suicide barriers, both physical and emotional, have been erected at Van Stadens Bridge, writes Oliver Roberts

THE road that leads to the bridge is straight and, at times, narrow. It's about a 40-minute drive from Port Elizabeth, along a section of the N2 staggered with signs saying "Sunshine Coast" and "Blue Horizon Bay"; each brown board displaying a white graphic of waves and an umbrella propped up on beach sand. The promise of serenity and good times up ahead. There's also a sign that says "Van Stadens Mouth".

In this part of the world, there is a wind that seems to blow constantly. It's a different wind that even in the peak of summer carries with it a barely detectable chill, like the last taste of something.

It comes at you from all angles, but mostly it hits your back, pushing you forward somewhat as you walk, a phantom force hoping that with one last breath you'll stagger foolishly and fall. This wind disrupts your days, and thwarts attempts at finding silence.

If you've never seen the bridge before, but you know you're heading towards it, you're waiting for it to appear over every crest. With everything you know about the bridge, you're expecting it to loom ominously into view, for there to be solemn signs warning that you are within range of it, and that when it does finally appear, it will emerge very obviously as a place of dark thought and death.

Instead, it arrives very suddenly, unremarkably, and before you have time to realise this is it, this is the bridge, you have crossed the gaping mouth and made it to the other side.

So you see there is nothing nefarious about the bridge. Just because a man leapt from it 12 days after its opening in November 1971 does not mean it is possessed. It is just a bridge that around 90 people have decided to jump from. And however much it may roar in your ears,

'The next morning, I hugged him and off he went. His washing was still in the washing machine'

however much it may sound like the whisper of God telling you it's time, however much it may feel like a laughing hand nudging you as you stand on the edge, it is just a wind.

Nevertheless, things have had to be done to stop this bridge from swallowing more people. First, cameras were erected so police could look out for anyone attempting suicide in high-contrast black and white. Then phones were put up with a direct line to a stranger, a counsellor who knows all the tricks to stop you taking the leap. You drop 140m.

But it didn't work. The cameras and phones couldn't stop the bridge. Once, a woman parked her car in the middle of it, opened her door, ran, and, without stopping, jumped, as easy and soothing as diving into a pool on a hot December day. All it took was three seconds.

One man, frightened not of death but rather the fall, brought a coil of thick rope. He tied it to the bridge and then to his neck, and did it this way. Another time — this is one of the bridge's worst offences — a man threw his two children off first.

So now they've built a green fence. An anti-climbing fence, it's called. It was completed late last year, just in time for suicide season — October to January. It's

the latest drastic step by those who have lost someone to the bridge, or are tired of retrieving bodies from its rocky belly, or are in search of extra time to tempt the weary and sinful not to die on that particular day.

All three types are gathered here today at a small farmhouse restaurant called Crossways just off the N2, a few kilometres from The Bridge itself. They're part of a trust called Friends of Van Stadens, which was set up four years ago and is responsible for the cameras and the phones and now the fence.

"The bridge became my baby," says Francois Nell, formerly of the Thornhill police station, which is nearby and whose officers are usually first on the scene when somebody jumps. "I have taken numerous bodies out from the gorge. Too many. A dead person is never a good sight to see, it's always traumatic. The bridge became such a big problem that it threatened a lot of the policemen's lives. One committed suicide not on the bridge, but because of the bridge."

Nell was friends with the late Franz Kemp, a journalist whose daughter leapt from the bridge in 2003. Kemp was one of the main instigators in getting cameras put up and establishing the trust. The cameras subsequently fell into disrepair and it was because of this that Cliff Rose, the current chairman of Friends of Van Stadens, became involved. He works for a security company that was responsible for upgrading the cameras.

"My involvement with the bridge is not about fixing cameras, it's about desperate people that have no hope, coming to the bridge to end their life prematurely," Rose says.

"I am a Christian and was convinced that I needed to do more than just supply technical assistance. I started to look at stats of how many people visit the bridge, attempted suicides, how many phone-ins, how many jump off, and in the two years we were doing that work, the suicide rate — which had been an average of two per year — jumped to six per year. So all of a sudden every month there was someone either jumping off or people attempting to. It was chaotic."

Rose has never lost someone to the bridge. However, his commute to Port Elizabeth takes him over it every day and he has been drawn, by pure providence, into negotiations with at least four potential jumpers over the years. One of the negotiations, assisted by police, lasted four hours.

"The first interaction with the guy, they don't want to talk to you, they don't want you near them," says Rose. "You spend an hour saying very little. That's what negotiating is all about. Many of these guys are on the bridge for up to nine hours."

All of us are sitting at a long table, eating bucolic bruschetta. Somebody stands up and says grace in Afrikaans. That wind pushes against the windows and gushes through the eucalyptus branches outside. There is a raffle for a Cadbury's hamper. The bridge is just down the road.

"Francie was his name," says Gillian Nutt, a counsellor. "He was a boarder at my house. One Saturday morning, I watched him go off on his little motorbike. Ten minutes later he had jumped. He was 20. My niece had just broken up with him. We had a chat the night before and I told him not to worry, that he's still young. The next morning, I hugged him and off he went. His washing was still in the washing machine."

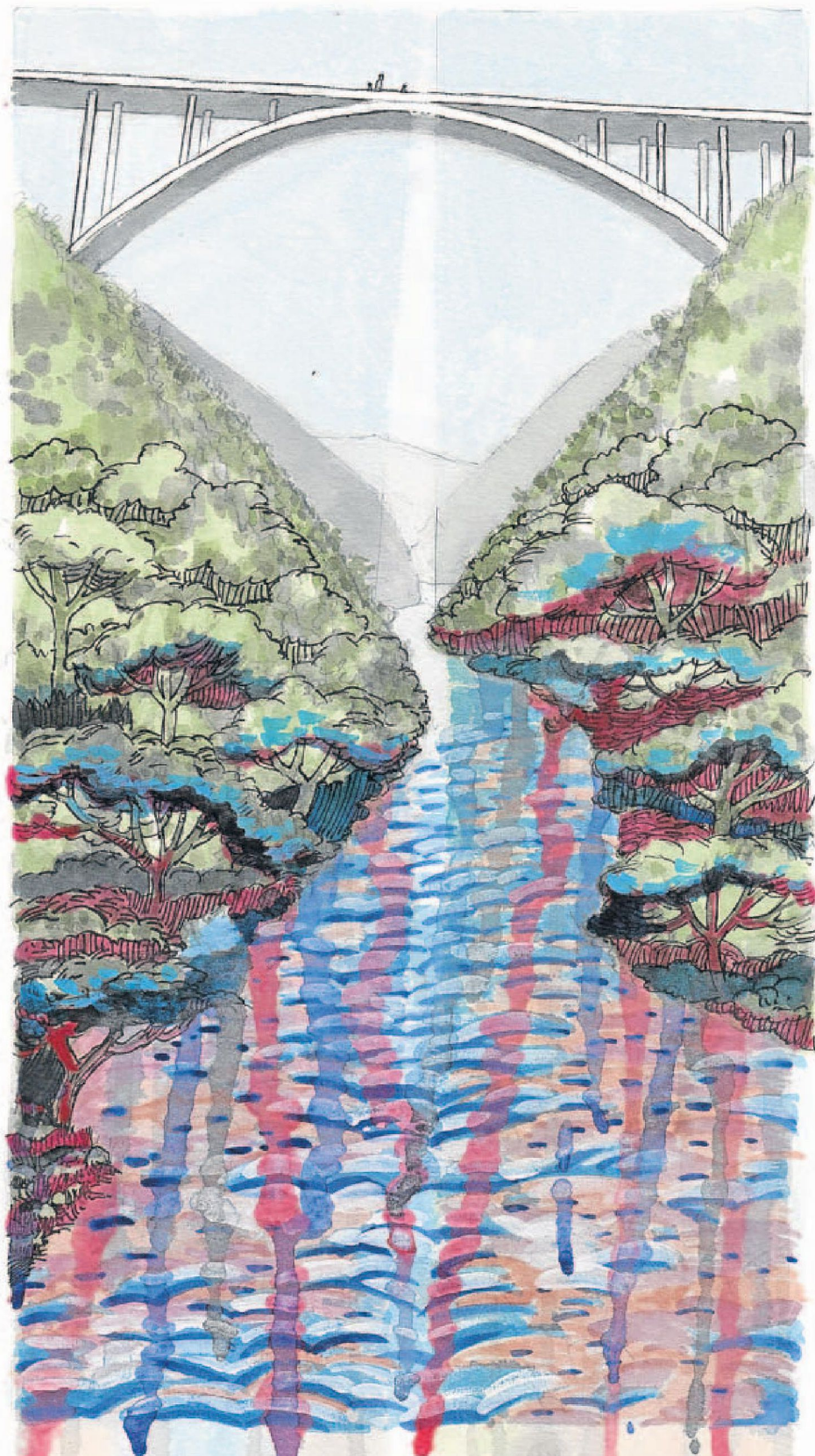


Illustration by LIZZA LITTLEWORT

Rose hopes news of the work being done on the bridge will spread around the world and put other bridges like this one out of harm's way. "There are many bridges around the world that have the same problem," he says. "Those local communities haven't been able to properly go through a process of writing a proposal, documenting the details, and seeing what the result is at the end, so I certainly hope that our work will be of benefit to other suicide hot spots throughout the world."

There's a man called Robbie Hift at the table. He's here because God told him to build a cross on the side of a hill next to the bridge. It took considerable patience. A big steel cross with the words "Jesus loves you" in large steel letters beside it.

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hearts, new hope and new vision," says Hift. "We felt an entire generation was losing their vision, losing the plot, and therefore jumping off the bridge." Hift's next plan is to install solar lighting on the cross so that even those drawn to the bridge in darkness will be forced to think of salvation before deciding whether to fall.

Susan Potgieter refers to "failed jumpers". They're the ones who are talked down and get taken to the police station to determine whether they're a threat to themselves or the community.

Failed jumpers. Potgieter is the director of Lifeline in Port Elizabeth. Often she's the

voice on the end of one of the bridge's phones. The bridge calls about six times a month.

"None of the people we have spoken to have actually jumped," she says. "The people who jump don't pick up the phone because they've already made up their mind." She doesn't want to say now that the fence is there, it will never happen again. She says there "will be" someone who comes with a ladder and climbs over. "The idea of the fence is to stall you," she says, "to give us time."

On August 8 2009, Johann Briel's 20-year-old son, Hansie, jumped from the bridge. That was when the cameras weren't working. The family home was down the road. "I said to my wife the other night that if it wasn't for my son's death, the bridge wouldn't have been closed off with a fence." This is how he is trying to come to terms with it.

"He gave no indication at all," says Briel. "We spoke to him two days before and everything was still OK. Afterwards, we found out he was on the bridge for about half an hour after SMSing his girlfriend. He stood on the bridge for almost half an hour and nobody stopped to help him. The thing about suicide is that everybody has got big things to say about it like, 'They're cowards,' and 'Let them jump.'"

"I was once on the bridge trying to talk somebody down and a car drove past and the driver shouted 'Jump, asshole! Jump!'"

Briel remembers that he did not have a car that day. He remembers being told that his son was on the bridge. He remembers leaving home and running towards it. He was too late, he says, one or two seconds too slow.

They had both run out of time.