

The Excuse Hound

Extract from a story by Ken Morlich

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I had turned the car around and driven to the Clydesdale Café. My first cup of coffee of the day felt undeserved; I pulled on it tentatively and found it tepid, with a scum of imperfectly dissolved instant granules circulating just shy of the rim. The bench beside me was occupied. "Suicides are often drawn to bridges," I'd observed.

The trucker next to me nodded as he shovelled down something brown and slick in texture that gave off a strong odour of meat: "Wouldn't know mate. What sort of dog you got there?"

"Oh, he's a mixture - something smooth mixed with something hairy," I said. "Only thing about him is, some days he won't go over bridges. Just won't go over them."

"He's driving, is he?" said the trucker. He finished his breakfast and rose to leave. "See you around," he said; and pointing at the dog, "you should get him a licence, mate."

The proprietor shuffled past and gathered up the debris of the trucker's meal. "Gephyrophobia," he'd said. I stared back at him, uncomprehending. "Gephyrophobia," he repeated. "Came across it in a pub quiz: 'the fear of crossing bridges'. Common enough problem. Another coffee?"

"No," I said, reaching for my jacket from the back of the bench. "I don't think so. Got to be on my way."

Outside in the car, I'd sat with my hands in the ten-to-two position on the steering wheel and tried to visualise myself driving over the bridge: the speedometer registering between 50 and 60; the dog asleep on his rug in the boot; passing the turning for the old ferry terminal; coming level with the gravel car park overlooking the straits, where the three camper vans with Dutch plates were parked as close to the edge as they could get; through the cutting where the rock is still bare and pink from recent blasting; out over the first expansion joint that jolts the body of the car with a double *thunk*; and then, still with the speedo hovering near the limit, into the main curve of the first span.

And that was as far as I could go.

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