

Michael Milburn

DEATH WISH

Midway through the Italian miniseries *The Best of Youth*, Matteo Carati, a policeman in his mid-thirties, returns to his Rome apartment on New Year's Eve. From Matteo's first appearance in the film as a university student, his feelings of alienation have been increasing; he now moves through his days in a state of coiled fury. In the past few hours, he has assaulted a suspect, raged at his girlfriend, and walked out on a New Year's dinner with his family. Arriving home, he turns on the TV and steps onto a balcony to watch fireworks exploding in the sky over Rome. As the TV announcer counts down the seconds to midnight, Matteo returns inside, murmuring "Happy New Year" as the hour strikes. Then he walks back onto the balcony, eases himself over the railing, and falls to his death in the courtyard below.

Even in light of Matteo's obvious emotional turmoil, his suicide is a shocking act, and leaves the viewer wondering whether it was impulsive or pre-meditated. Certain aspects of the situation—the New Year revelry, the proximity of the balcony, Matteo's inability to reach his girlfriend by phone after the quarrel—suggest that he yielded to a moment of overwhelming despair. At the same time, he has long seemed headed for catastrophe. "Everything causes him pain," his father says. In the months before Matteo's unexpected appearance at the New Year's dinner, he had already cut himself off from his family and been reprimanded for excessive use of force on the job. As he disappears over the balcony, he gives the impression of a man gratefully launching himself away from life.

My first thought upon seeing this scene was that this is how I would commit suicide, not necessarily in the same manner as Matteo, but with the same weary efficiency. It's a prospect I've been contemplating for over forty years without ever coming close to following through—no failed or aborted attempts, not even the preliminary step of procuring a gun, pills, or an exhaust-diverting hose. Suicidal thoughts have been more of a companion to my life than an

operative plan for ending it. I have battled them through therapy, which increased my understanding of them, and antidepressants, which diminished them to the point that I became unrecognizable to myself. In the end, the main lesson I learned from my attempts to cure my suicidal tendencies is that they are intrinsic to my nature.

Watching Matteo give in to his urge in *The Best of Youth*, I wondered what has kept me from doing the same for all these years. Or, if I'm not desperate enough to follow through, why do I waste so much time flirting with the possibility? It would appear that my life possesses enough attractive qualities to keep me alive, so why don't I redirect my attention to embracing these? My loved ones are first among these attractions, yet I'm more likely to pass a day thinking about ending my life than celebrating theirs. Is it my depressive nature that makes me more comfortable dwelling on death than on love, cultivating my suicidal thoughts rather than banishing them?

The fact that medication all but eliminated these thoughts suggests that they are correctable and to some extent chemical in origin. But the reason I discontinued antidepressants was that their effect felt more like an alteration in my personality than a correction. This makes me wonder if I genuinely want to die, but don't act on my wish. For one thing, no matter how difficult it is for me to derive pleasure from my life, I can't imagine depriving my son of his father or not being able to share in his development. Before he was born, I suspect that what kept me from killing myself was fear of the act itself, not so much the pain or consequence as my role in the performance. Climbing the bridge railing, positioning the gun barrel, gathering the pills, sealing the garage—the thought of doing these things and then committing self-murder terrifies me, as if I would become the main character in a scary movie that is too scary for me to sit through.

I used to assume that with proper planning, one could kill oneself quickly and painlessly, that between the point of surrendering to despair and the act of suicide there ought not be much of a barrier. But there is a barrier, and it arises when one's resolve falters. What Woody Allen allegedly said about success, that 80% of it is showing up, doesn't apply to suicide, which takes enough clarity of mind to orchestrate the act combined with enough disturbance of mind to follow through with it. Occasionally, the peak of a person's will to die coincides with the availability of an efficient method.

One such convergence occurred in 2005 when a Massachusetts man, Christopher Burda, handed a loaded gun to his friend Nancy Choquette, hoping to “snap her out” of her despondency. Choquette proceeded to shoot herself in the head, and Burda was convicted of involuntary manslaughter.

What interested me about the story was how neatly Burda enabled Choquette to bypass the obstacles that lay between her desire to kill herself and the fulfillment of that desire. It might seem that the means for suicide lie close at hand at all times, but it's not that easy. Acts such as leaping in front of a train or driving into a building require substantial willpower and do not guarantee instant, painless death. Hanging, overdose, and bridge jumping all involve the possibility of survival or enough lead time for one to change one's mind. One suicide expert is right in saying that a bridge jump is “sure, quick, clean, and available,” but overstates when he claims that “It's like having a loaded gun on your kitchen table.” The process of getting to the bridge and over the railing affords a lot of time to reconsider. But a gun offered at a moment of maximum distress is an ideal opportunity, akin to having someone willing to inject the right stuff on demand.

Which begs the question—how many people who think about killing themselves are only one Christopher Burda away from doing so? In my case, I wonder whether the knowledge that I am unlikely to be handed a loaded gun makes me cavalier about contemplating suicide, like someone who taunts a wild animal from outside the zoo cage. Similarly, do despondent people for whom the means to an efficient end is indeed “sure, quick, clean, and available”—gun owners, hospital or pharmacy workers—think about this topic more carefully, or take pains to avoid it, perhaps increasing their sense of being trapped by despair?

We have all looked down from a tall building and wondered what it would be like to jump, or thrilled to the proximity of death as the subway roared through. If there's ever a moment when suicide contemplators have to examine the seriousness of their intentions, it's then—if we want to, why don't we? Of those who do, some have planned their move, and some act on impulse. Others manage to restrain themselves, perhaps just barely, while a final group (to which I belong) is content to entertain the idea without ever moving closer to following through. For most of these people, the decision

to end their lives or not is rooted in reflection, the outcome of an ongoing internal argument; the same introspectiveness that fuels their desperation also enables them to keep it in check. By handing his friend a loaded gun in the hope of curing her suicidal urges, Christopher Burda instead undermined her ability to keep talking herself out of them.

Once there in the labyrinth,
You were safe from your reasons
– Donald Justice, "For the Suicides"

The nature of my own internal argument against suicide became clear to me when my son, a sophomore at New York University, showed me around his school's campus. Dev matriculated at NYU in 2005, two years after two undergraduates had killed themselves by jumping from the tenth floor of the university's Bobst Library. As part of our tour, Dev walked me through the library, where Plexiglas barriers had been installed along the open-air walkways. When we reached the tenth floor, I looked down at the marble lobby and understood how the jump would have appealed to the distraught students as an efficient and dramatic way to end their pain.

As I peered through the newly erected glass, my psychological barriers to jumping also came into focus. My depression was at its usual intensity that day, meaning that the prospect of suicide was not far from my mind. But even if the way down had been clear and Dev had not been beside me, there were projects that I wanted to see through, prospects that I looked forward to. In other words, everything that keeps people alive kept me alive at that moment. I knew that my morbid thoughts would return soon after I left the library, but also that I would continue to talk myself out of them as I had for forty years. Not that I take for granted my success in keeping suicide at bay; given its persistence in my thinking, and my melancholy temperament, I doubt that it would take much to weaken my argument for staying alive.

After Matteo Carati arrives home on New Year's Eve, he wanders around his apartment and calls his girlfriend several times without leaving a message. One can see him grappling with the emotional pain that has plagued him throughout the movie; for

those few moments, the slightest shift in his thinking or even his circumstances is capable of swaying his mood. If it's raining and he is not drawn to his balcony to watch the fireworks; if his girlfriend answers her phone; if he learns, as the viewer will learn later, that she is pregnant by him, Matteo might live another day, even a long life. But the unanswered phone, the celebration, and the convenient balcony clinch the argument, propelling him through the open French doors and over the parapet.

The idea that most acts of suicide hinge on a delicate internal argument gains credence in the documentary film, *The Bridge*. In 2004, director Eric Steel stationed multiple telephoto cameras at different locations near the Golden Gate Bridge and filmed from sunrise to sunset from January 1 to December 31. The film intersperses footage of people walking across the bridge, pausing at the railing, and in several cases jumping, with interviews with the suicides' surviving loved ones. Many of the jumpers had previously confessed their hopelessness and sometimes even their intentions. None seems to head to the Golden Gate on impulse, and none fails to pause between arriving at the rail and going over. That is, each engages in a final moment—sometimes much longer—of reflection.

One of the film's subjects, Kevin Hines, decides after jumping that he does not want to die, maneuvers himself to enter the water feet first, and is one of only twenty-nine people ever to survive the fall. The resolve that Hines showed in getting himself to the bridge and over the rail is consistent with my theory about suicide as the result of reflection. But so is his mid-air reversal, as Hines appears to have continued his internal debate on the way down. In an interview with *The New York Times*, he said,

I'll tell you what I can't get out of my head. It's watching my hands come off that railing and thinking to myself, My God, what have I just done? Because I know that almost everyone else who's gone off that bridge, they had that exact same thought at that moment. All of a sudden, they didn't want to die, but it was too late. Somehow I made it; they didn't.

Maybe such last minute changes of heart are common, but for obvious reasons, unreported. Alternatively, Hines's could be seen as an example of an impulse that overrides reflection, comparable to

Nancy Choquette's decision to pull the trigger. It's understandable that the sight of nothing but air between oneself and San Francisco Bay two hundred and twenty feet below would, like a loaded gun, supercede any prior argument.

Listening to Hines talk on film about his rewarding life since the Bay Patrol pulled him from the water made me wonder what I would have missed if I had followed through on my own suicidal tendencies. Happiness? That seems the best reason to appreciate staying alive, but how happy can I be if I spend so much time thinking about dying? The life I resumed after descending from Bobst Library didn't promise much happiness—I'm too plagued by depression and anxiety to expect that—but it does offer fulfillment, which I derive from writing, relationships, teaching, nature, and art. Maybe for some people fulfillment is synonymous with happiness, but for those of us who talk ourselves into life each day, I imagine it's both less cheerful and more valuable, the cake rather than the frosting.

There is one character that *The Bridge* keeps returning to. Dressed in black, with flowing black hair, he lingers at the railing for hours, pacing back and forth, looking out at the bay. As the telephoto lens studies him, he looks serene, more like a pedestrian pausing to enjoy the view than a man deciding whether to jump to his death. Interspersed with these shots, interviews with his family and friends describe his chronic unhappiness, the result both of his temperament and of recent professional and romantic setbacks that led him, in one friend's account, to scrawl "End Me" on the sidewalk during his last visit. The film concludes with him climbing onto the rail, balancing for a moment, and falling backward with such gracefulness that I swear he was heading for fulfillment as well.

Meanwhile the

Bay was preparing herself
To receive you, the for once
Wholly adequate female

To your dark inclinations

– Donald Justice, "For the Suicides"

For me, part of the appeal of contemplating suicide is that of knowing my end. Our apprehension of so many things—experiences, books, movies, songs, walks—is affected by an awareness of when they will end. My attention to a book changes with the approach of the last page, and I respond differently to the overture of a symphony than to the final movement. I only feel confident about a piece of my own writing when I have in place a satisfactory last sentence or line. During their final quarrel, when Matteo's girlfriend tells him, "You like books because you can close them whenever you want. Life is different. It's not you who decides," he responds, "You're wrong. I've always decided." Imagining the end of my life reminds me of its finiteness both as opportunity and as source of pain. As morbid as this reasoning might sound to others, for me it's heartening; by acknowledging my suicidal thoughts and envisioning their worst outcome, I increase my control over them, reducing the likelihood that they will impel me to act. In *The Noonday Demon: An Atlas of Depression*, Andrew Solomon writes:

... the more fully one comes to terms with the idea of rational suicide, the safer one will be from irrational suicide. Knowing that if I get through this minute I could always kill myself in the next one makes it possible to get through this minute without being utterly overwhelmed.

Knowing the way out, one chooses to stay in. Viewed in this way, my suicidal thoughts are not just a symptom of depression or an endgame with despair, but a survival strategy, a death wish I can live with.