



Jumper

By Stephen Gauer

A year after his wife was killed, Fitch sold his house in the south end of the city and moved to the North Shore, to a townhouse on the side of a mountain. His new backyard faced a solid wall of dark forest. At night, in the bedroom on the third floor, he could hear the trees moving in the wind. He imagined cougars, coyotes, eagles and owls alive in the darkness just beyond the fence. *The world is still wild*, he thought, *so why do we pretend we're safe in a city, why do we pretend we're safe at all?*

Fitch was renting the townhouse from Morrison, the assistant entertainment editor at the paper. Morrison had a Dublin accent and a shaved head that made him look sinister. He worked evenings, the same shift that Fitch did. He mocked everything in the world, including himself. Fitch did not mock anything. He did his job quietly and competently. He paid Morrison \$800 a month and listened to his stories about call girls and all-night parties in the high-rise condo he'd just bought, a few blocks

from the newspaper building. The source of Morrison's money remained a mystery. "Money makes money, remember that," he told Fitch. "You're doing fine yourself, despite the domestic tragedy. As for me, another year or two, a bit of luck, and I'm out of this shit job."

One night in early spring, a couple of months after moving, Fitch was driving home from work when a strange thing happened. He was halfway across the Lion's Gate Bridge when a woman dressed in a black sweater and jeans suddenly appeared in his lane and began waving her arms. He swore under his breath and stopped the car only a few feet from her. Her hair was blowing in the wind. Her face was wet and her nose was running. Before Fitch could do anything, turn off the radio, open the window, do anything at all, she ran to the passenger side, opened the door and got in.

"Go!" she said. "Just go!"

Cars were already backed up behind him. Someone honked a horn. Fitch didn't know what to do, so he did what the woman said. He put the car back in gear and started to accelerate. His heart was racing. He felt sick to his stomach.

"Fucking cops," she said. "They don't give you any time. They're onto you in a flash, just like that." She snapped her fingers.

Fitch didn't know what to say, so he said, "What?"

"They have cameras. They see everything."

She was so tall her head grazed the roof of the car. Fitch wanted to turn and look at her but he was afraid to take his eyes off the car in front of him. He couldn't see any police cars. What was she talking about?

"Where are you going?" she said.

"Where am I going?" He was trying to stay calm.

“Yes, where are you going? I need a place to stay.”

“No,” Fitch said, “you can’t ...”

“Please. I have money. Please.”

Fitch took a deep breath. He thought for a minute about stopping the car, opening the door, telling her to get out. He was tired. He didn’t stop the car. He drove home.

Her name was Liane. She told Fitch she’d run away from her husband. They sat in the living room, next to the sliding glass doors that overlooked the balcony, the yard, and the forest beyond. She’d combed her hair and washed her face. Fitch looked at her, saw how expertly she’d recovered from whatever she’d been trying to do, and then looked away. He kept thinking, *why am I doing this, how will I get rid of her?*

“You are a godsend,” she said. “Do you mind if I smoke?”

Fitch minded but shook his head. She lit a cigarette, blew out the match and then held it between her fingers, looking for an ashtray. Fitch went into the kitchen and brought back a small Chinese bowl.

“I didn’t do anything, you know, ” she said. “I was only thinking about it. Thinking isn’t the same as doing.”

Fitch didn’t believe her but he didn’t say anything. He looked down at the coffee table, at the bowl slowly filling with ashes from her cigarette. He could tell her to leave. He could call a cab. He could call a cab and pay for it and then she would go away.

“Look,” he said. “I’d like to help you but ...”

“You’ve already helped me. On the bridge. Here. Just let me stay for the night.”

He was too tired to argue. He let her stay. He got out some sheets from the linen closet and made up a bed on the pull-out sofa in the TV room. He took a long hot shower and got into bed. He was exhausted. It was strange to feel the presence of another human being in the house; he wasn't sure if he liked it or not. He realized yet again that almost everything he did and felt had a quality of ambivalence, of not knowing one way or the other. Had he been much more opinionated before Carol's death? Yes. He remembered many arguments about movies, books, politics, religion, friendly arguments, of course, the kind that intelligent, married people have, but arguments requiring strong opinions on both sides. He thought he would never argue like that again.

In the morning, Fitch found Liane in the kitchen reading the newspapers. He made coffee. He apologized for the uncomfortable chairs. He was surprised again at how tall she was. Even sitting down, she seemed to dominate the table. As she read, Fitch stared at her hair, the smooth oval of her face, the perfectly applied lipstick, the way she opened her lips slightly as she read. He looked down and began to read a story about a new movie he wanted to see. He read an interesting sentence about the movie's director, who had been one of Carol's favorite directors, and was about to read the sentence aloud, thinking Carol was sitting there, but of course she was not.

"I'll drive you," Fitch said. "Anywhere you want to go."

"No," she said. "I'll call a cab."

"Are you sure?"

"I insist."

"Where will you go?"

She smiled. "I don't know yet. But I'll be fine."

When the cab came, he opened the door for her. She got into the back seat and then leaned forward and gave directions to the driver. Fitch didn't recognize the address. Where did she live? He had no idea. Was she going back to the husband? He had no idea about that either.

Fitch knew that people jumped from the bridge; everybody knew that. Dale and Lindsay, the paper's two crime reporters, took turns monitoring the police scanner for tipoffs about fires, car crashes, building collapses, and other minor disasters. The police who watched for jumpers on the bridge used low-power radios that were hard to monitor. What was the point? The police wouldn't confirm a successful suicide and refused to answer questions about frequency.

"We really don't give a shit about jumpers," Dale said. He just one year out of journalism school, grossly overweight, wore only t-shirts and blue or black Levis. His story preferences, in order, were street racing deaths, street gangs, police corruption, police racism, police incompetence and police nepotism. Fitch had trouble picturing Dale chasing after anything, but his byline made it into the paper day after day, without fail.

"Besides," Dale said, "with the cameras, they catch 'em all. Well, almost all."

"How many try to jump?"

"We guess maybe one a month. Fewer in summer, more in winter."

Now every time Fitch drove over the bridge he thought about Liane. He imagined her there, right there, in the lane he was in, standing in front of the headlights of his car, waving her arms and asking him to stop. *The bridge is different now*, he thought to himself, *the bridge has changed forever.*

A week went by. Then one evening at work, just as he'd finished laying out the local news pages for the first edition, she phoned him. When he picked up the phone, Morrison made a face, then turned his hand into a gun and pretended to shoot him. Fitch shook his head and swiveled his chair so no one could see his face.

"Hello," she said. "It's Liane." Her voice was the same, but not the same, cooler, like a summer drink, slightly chilled.

"Yes," Fitch said.

"How are you?"

"Fine. How are you?"

"Fine."

"I'd like to ask you to lunch."

Fitch paused, took a breath, and let it out slowly. "I'm not usually here for lunch," he said. "I mean, downtown. I start at six."

"I know. But you could make an exception for me. Couldn't you?"

He said he could. Yes. She told him the name of a restaurant and they agreed on a day and a time. He hung up. When he swiveled around again, Morrison was right there.

"Well?" Morrison said.

"What?" Fitch said.

"Who was that?"

"A friend."

"Hah. You don't have any."

"I have work to do," Fitch said.

The name of the restaurant was Diverse. The interior was painted five shades of gray. The tables were smoked glass, the chairs made of stainless steel and leather, and the centerpiece on each table was a candle shaped like a hand grenade. Fitch thought this was strange. He felt uncomfortable in expensive restaurants. Carol had always said, relax, you're the customer, it's their job to make you feel comfortable but this had always been difficult for him.

He was glad he had put a jacket on. Liane was wearing a black skirt and black turtleneck sweater, white boots and a tan suede jacket. Her clothes looked very expensive.

Liane ordered a dirty martini. Fitch had a beer.

Fitch studied her face while she looked down at the menu and described the relative merits of each of the entrees they might order. He hadn't noticed before how perfect her eyebrows were, like bird's wings, bent in the middle and gracefully tapering to a fine point. Her face was calm, without a single line or wrinkle, as though it had never been written on. Her skin was very white and her lips very red.

"Have you decided?" she said. "I'm having the duck."

"That sounds fine," Fitch said. "And I'll have another beer."

Now that he was sitting opposite her, staring so brazenly at her, Fitch began to relax. They talked about movies and Fitch was surprised to find out that she knew an enormous amount, far more than he did.

"I'm lucky," she said. "I have a photographic memory. I can remember every movie I've seen, and every name in the credit roll, assuming I'm paying attention, of course."

Fitch didn't believe this, so he tested her. He named five movies and she knew the complete casts of each one, beginning with main characters, secondary characters, right down to bit players, the assistant director, sound and lighting technicians, everyone.

"I have a terrible memory," Fitch said. "I can barely remember the name of the last movie I saw."

When the entrée came, she cut each slice of duck into smaller pieces, then carefully dipped each piece into the sweet sauce before placing it in her mouth. Fitch ate ravenously and ordered more beer.

He felt hot, so he took his jacket off and put it on the back of the chair. He excused himself and went to the bathroom. His balance felt a bit wobbly; he realized he was drunker than he thought. But I won't drink any more, he thought, I have to be sober for work tonight.

They ordered coffee after the meal.

"I've enjoyed this," Liane said. "Have you?"

"Yes," Fitch said.

"I'm glad. My way of saying thank you."

"You didn't have to."

"Of course I did," Liane said.

"It's not as though I saved your life."

"In a way you did."

"No," Fitch said. "Not really."

She paid the bill. As she signed the credit card slip Fitch looked down and tried to read her last name, but he couldn't make it out. She had a dramatic signature, full of swirls and circles, completely indecipherable.

He was going through the pockets of all his jackets looking for his sunglasses a few days later when he found something else. It was a

small white envelope. It contained ten one-hundred dollar bills. A thousand dollars. US, of course. Fitch laughed.

When Fitch told people his wife had died when a car hit her at an intersection three blocks from the house, they usually assumed the driver had been a punk in a fast car, or a drugged-up street racer, or a spoiled rich kid from across the ocean. They were just waiting to pass judgment, *dammit why don't the parents control the kids and why are they giving them brand-new, high-performance cars in the first place, they should be driving old beaters like we used to*. Fitch would wait patiently, slowly shake his head and tell them Carol was killed by a 42-year-old mother of three who was reaching over to check the seat belt on the eldest child, on a rainy evening in March, and she didn't see the red light and Carol must have assumed she was going to stop and that's why she stepped off the curb. She managed five or six steps before the metallic silver SUV struck her in the middle of the chest and threw her high into the air in an arc that ended on wet shiny pavement forty feet away.

When the cop came to the door, Fitch had just finished cooking risotto for dinner. He was wondering why Carol was taking so long to get back from the liquor store six blocks away. He wasn't worried but he wasn't relaxed either. She always walked. If he'd gone, it would have been in the car and he'd have been back ages ago. Fitch was turning the heat to very low when the doorbell rang. He was thinking, *it's time to grate the parmesan, oh damn, the doorbell, she must have forgotten her keys*.

He opened the door. A cop, wet from the rain, was standing on his front porch. Fitch's heart, beyond his control as always, began to beat very fast. Police always made him nervous even at the best of times.

"Are you Daniel Fitch?" she asked.

Fitch nodded.

"It's about your wife. May I come in?"

Fitch's heart was now beating so fast and so hard that he couldn't hear anything. They sat in the living room. The cop spoke. *Accident. Intersection. Hospital. Immediately.* The cop reached over and took his hand. He didn't cry. He wanted his heart to stop beating so loudly. He still couldn't hear what she was saying. Something about standing up. Where was his coat? He walked to the closet. She helped him put his arms through the sleeves of the coat. She asked him if he was cooking something. He said yes and went into the kitchen and turned off the stove. He remembered to lock the front door behind him.

He waited at the hospital, in a room with pale green walls, a photo of the Queen, and two-year-old magazines on the table. He knew there were people he needed to call but he'd forgotten his cell phone and he didn't know the numbers and what could he say until he knew whether she would live or die?

At a quarter to midnight a doctor came into the waiting room. Fitch couldn't look at him, but he couldn't not look, either. On TV, he knew, the doctor always said, "I'm sorry." Did they say that in real life? Fitch really didn't want to know. The doctor didn't say anything. The doctor just shook his head.

Before the accident, Fitch had always thought that the urge for revenge would be so powerful, so irresistible, that you would have to give in to it. But aside from gangsters and bikers, almost no one sought revenge for a killing. Fitch once spent most of a morning searching the newspaper's database and he couldn't find a single story about a revenge killing.

The reason was obvious: grief smothers anger the same way it smothers everything else. How could you plot and execute revenge when you barely had control over your own life? Fitch struggled just to get out of bed and make his own meals in the first few weeks after Carol's death. His mother stayed with him. She was happy and upbeat, as always, acting as though a very sad thing had happened, yes, but after all, life must go on, mustn't it?

"A positive attitude will do wonders for your state of mind," she said one day. They were making the bed and she was fluffing the pillows in a way that reminded him of his childhood, when he was ten years old, during the Cuban missile crisis, and making beds together and his mother saying *I hope this isn't upsetting you* and he said *What do you mean?* And she said *That there might be war* and he said *No*, because what he was feeling, for the first time in his life, was the excitement of momentous events, of change and possibility.

Now they were again making the bed together and his wife was dead. He would never lie beside her again. The ache of this was so overwhelming that he had to sit down on the bed and rest for a moment.

"Dan?" His mother sat beside him and held his hand.

Everything is wrong, he thought. *Everything is wrong and will never be right again.*

When Fitch went back to work after Carol's death, he asked to be taken off the city hall beat and assigned a desk job. He told himself that he was tired of chasing stories, chasing people, interviewing politicians, listening to them talk, looking up phone numbers, waiting for cabs, reading long, boring documents in search of crime and corruption—he was tired of all of that and needed a rest. But in fact the world scared him now. The newsroom was safe and familiar. It never changed. Its demands were predictable. He came in every night at six and left eight hours later. He did all his work on a computer screen, laid out the pages, edited the stories, wrote the headlines. He was very good at it. *No more stories to write, he thought, and that's ok because it's true, the stories really don't change, do they? I'll be quite fine if I never write another story for the rest of my life.*

Morrison had an encyclopedic knowledge of actors, actresses, movie stars and supermodels. He knew all the names and all the faces. When he was bored, he'd make phony layouts on the screen, with doctored photos showing Drew Barrymore marrying Cameron Diaz and Arnold Schwarzenegger kissing George Clooney. Sometimes he'd print them out, sign them, and give them to Fitch as souvenirs.

One night Fitch was talking to Morrison about some of the new movies that were opening that weekend. Morrison said they all sounded like shit, except for a low-budget thriller, shot in the city, that starred a TV actor who'd been famous a few years earlier.

"This guy is great," Morrison said. "I looked him up on the Internet. Twenty features, mostly low-budget, in the last seven years. Spends a lot of time here, apparently."

Morrison showed Fitch a still from the movie press kit. Fitch didn't watch much TV. He didn't recognize the name or the face.

"The guy's got a kooky wife, according to my sources. She runs away, threatens suicide, comes back, acts normal for a year or two, then goes out and does it all over again. Here's the wife."

Morrison pulled out a blurry, paparazzi-style photo from the pile on his desk. There was the actor, arguing with the wife, in front of a restaurant. The wife was Liane.

He didn't need her money. He had four hundred thousand dollars in the bank. But that wasn't the point. What did she think she was buying? Silence? Cooperation? When he told Morrison he was going to give the money back, Morrison laughed and said he was a fool.

"But you'll help me find her, right?" Fitch said.

"Yes, but you're still a bloody fool," Morrison said.

Morrison had contacts, he knew people, and some of those people owed him favours. It took him a week to get the address of Liane's rented house in Kerrisdale. The husband was shooting a sci-fi movie on a soundstage in North Vancouver. "Don't fuck up," Morrison said. "Go mid-week in the middle of the day."

Fitch showed up at the house on a Tuesday afternoon, his day off. The house, the smallest on the block of huge houses, looked like a miniature reproduction of a Tudor mansion. He parked the car across the street.

The front door was black, with a tiny view hole at eye level. He pressed the doorbell, waited, and then pressed it again. He counted to twenty and was about to turn away from the door when it opened

suddenly. Liane stood in the hallway. She was wearing the same black sweater and jeans that she'd been wearing that night on the bridge. No makeup. Her hair was pulled back into a pony tail. She looked sixteen.

Morrison said she was thirty-two. How was that possible?

She had no expression on her face. Fitch told himself, *stay calm*.

"Hello," she said. "I didn't expect to see you again."

"I have something for you. May I come in?"

She nodded. They went into the living room. She offered him a glass of wine and he accepted. He reminded himself, *just return the money, drink the glass of wine and get out of there*.

"It's a beautiful day," he said.

"Yes," she said.

"Your husband is shooting today."

"Yes, he is."

"The movie—is it going well?"

"Yes."

Fitch took a large sip of wine. It was very good.

"So you have something for me," Liane said.

"Yes," Fitch said. He took the envelope from his pocket and put it on the coffee table. His heart began to speed up.

"You don't want it?"

"No," he said.

There was silence. Fitch could hear traffic out on the street.

"Ah," she said. "How old are you?"

Fitch told her he was forty-five.

She smiled. "How pathetic."

He said nothing. He was trying to stay calm.

“Look at you,” she said. “How dare you give the money back. You’re nothing. A little beige man in a cheap jacket with a pathetic job on a pathetic little newspaper. I was nice to you, wasn’t I? I owed you a little but I paid you back a lot.”

Fitch wanted to put his glass down and leave. He didn’t want to argue or discuss anything. He’d achieved his objective; the money was there on the table, now he could leave.

“Excuse me, I have to go,” he said. His heart was pounding now. It was difficult to hear. Was she speaking or just moving her lips?

He put the wine down and stood up. He started to move towards the door. She got in his way. She was still holding the glass of wine. It was sloshing back and forth because her arm was moving.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

“Excuse me, I just want to leave.”

“But I’m not finished. This is my house. You don’t leave until I’m finished.”

He took a very deep breath. Could he just step around her and get to the door? He didn’t want to touch her. He just wanted to leave.

Now she was pointing a finger at him. The wine was sloshing.

“Fuck you,” she said. He didn’t like the way her finger was jabbing him in the chest. When he looked straight into her eyes, he could see they were a cold, pale blue. She wasn’t sixteen, she wasn’t thirty-two, how old was she now?

“Fuck you,” he said.

She slapped him very hard, so hard that the wine in her glass finally sloshed over the rim and spilled on the carpet. His face collapsed into the pain of a thousand needles and the snap of his head hurt his neck; when he brought his head around again he felt as though every

muscle in his neck had been set on fire. He felt his eyes well up with tears. He reached up with his hand and wiped them away.

Then she was gone. He could hear her swearing about the carpet. He looked around the corner. She was in the kitchen, pulling paper towels off a roll mounted on the splash counter.

He walked quickly to the front door, opened it, and left the house. Where was his car? Right across the street. He got in and locked the doors.

It was dark when he woke up. His mouth felt thick and sour from the wine. There was a bottle somewhere, probably empty. His neck still hurt. He moved his body slowly and sat up. He felt like a little beige man, getting smaller and smaller, soon shrinking right down to nothing, to the size of a dot over the i, Times Roman 8 point.

The empty bottle sat accusingly on the coffee table in the living room. He ignored it. He thought, *If I can ignore everything, then perhaps I can accomplish something.*

He got into his car and drove to the bridge. *I'm just looking*, he thought, *yes, I'm just looking and thinking, I'm not actually doing.* Just past the north end of the bridge there was a small building by the side of the road. He parked the car next to the building, got out, and started walking towards the bridge. When he passed the small building, he looked through the window to an office where a woman sat at a desk. He looked away quickly and kept walking

It took only five minutes to reach the midpoint of the bridge. Fitch realized that in all his years of living in the city he had never once walked across the bridge. He looked towards the city and saw the black water,

the lights, the dim profiles of trees and mountains and buildings. The wind blowing up Burrard Inlet felt cold and alive on his face.

Fitch touched the green railing. The paint was new and still glossy. The top rail came to the midpoint of his chest. The bottom rail was just inches above the sidewalk. The vertical bars of the railing were far enough apart that you could quite easily put your foot on the bottom rail. Fitch did this. He leaned over the railing and looked straight down at the dark water below.

It would be easy to jump if that were your intention. No nets, no protective screens, there was nothing at all between you and the dark water below. You would jump and be in the air for mere seconds and then hit the water at 75 miles an hour. The force of this would smash your ribs instantly. If you were still alive when you came to the surface, the tidal currents would carry you away from the bridge, flood or ebb, it didn't matter, and then you would die of internal injuries, or drowning, or hypothermia, or shock.

Fitch stepped back off the bottom rail and looked up. There was a lamp pole the thickness of a man's skull right next to the railing. If you climbed onto the top rail, you could use that pole to steady yourself, until you were ready to jump.

"Sir, would you please step away from the railing?"

Who was that? Fitch turned around. A policeman was standing there. Fitch saw his empty patrol car with flashers on. Traffic was stopped in both directions. The lights on the bridge had become brighter and more vivid. Green lights above two lanes, red lights above one. Fitch's heart, betraying him yet again, began to beat very quickly.

"Sir, please step away from the railing."

Fitch was confused. What did the police think? That he would jump?

He stepped away from the railing.

“Sir, what are you doing here?”

“I ... I just came to look,” Fitch said. He felt like a fool. Why was his heart beating so fast? When it beat like that, he couldn’t hear or think, or do anything at all. Why did he feel so guilty?

“Please get in the car and I’ll escort you off the bridge.”

“I’m fine,” Fitch said. “I was just out walking, you see ...”

“Is that your car by the monitoring station?”

“Yes, but ...”

“Please get in the car, sir. We’ll get you off the bridge.”

Fitch was having trouble moving his legs. He wanted to walk towards the police car but couldn’t. The policeman helped him move away from the railing.

“I’m not a jumper,” Fitch said. But as the words left his mouth he knew they were false; he knew he was not safe. Fitch and the policeman were moving towards the car now. The policeman’s fingers were digging into his arm. The lights on the bridge shone brightly.

Jumper won the 2006 Prairie Fire Short Fiction prize and the 2007 Western Magazine Fiction Award.