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OUR TOWNS

## **A Bridge's Grim Allure for Damaged Souls**

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SOUTH NYACK, N.Y.

The first one, Alan J. Mergel, was a 55-year-old personal injury lawyer with a home in Montvale, N.J., and an office in the Empire State Building.

He pulled his 2007 BMW into the right lane, which was closed for maintenance, on the southbound Tappan Zee Bridge on Thursday afternoon, stopped briefly and then drove away after workers came by to offer help. He drove across the bridge into Westchester, paid his toll, turned back to Rockland and then circled back toward Westchester. Then he stopped the car again and on a chilly April afternoon did what about 30 other people have done over the past decade. He got out of the car, left his keys in the ignition and jumped to his death in the Hudson below.

The second one has not been identified pending notification of his family. The police say he was an Indian immigrant from Ossining who was driving a rented 2008 Hyundai with Virginia plates. He stopped, too, heading north. About 2:30 p.m., or a little more than 10 minutes after Mr. Mergel's body was pulled from the river, he jumped, too. The police have not yet located any relatives and believe that he might have been homeless. His body was recovered by the same firefighters from Piermont whose boat had recovered Mr. Mergel.

No one can remember two suicides in such proximity on the Tappan Zee, and the police believe they were unrelated — two discordant planets aligned for no known reason. But then, who can quite explain the grim appeal of the Tappan Zee for those looking for a swift, irrevocable way to end it all?

The span, now officially known as the Malcolm Wilson Tappan Zee Bridge, opened in December 1955. Its first suicide took place a year and a half later — a 31-year-old mother from Ardsley who had told her husband she was going shopping. The most recent before Thursday's is thought to be Jonathan Draughn, 23, of Newburgh, who apparently abandoned his 1997 Honda Civic on the Rockland-bound side at 5 a.m. on Saturday, March 22. His body has not been found.

They all have a story. Mr. Mergel, who had a particular fondness for the pro-plaintiff juries of the Bronx, might have a more complicated one than most. He found his way into the tabloids in 2003 when he was said to be having an affair with a Russian émigré, Svetlana Aronov, who vanished while taking her father's cocker spaniel for a walk. Her body was later found in the East River, but how she died remains unclear. Mr. Mergel was not viewed as a suspect by the police.

Some leave messages, like the woman from White Plains in 1959 who left instructions on the disposal of her body, her wedding ring and her crucifix. Most, like Fidel Zapata, 50, of White Plains, just leave behind riddles to

be agonized over privately or in the courts. Mr. Zapata's widow, Frances Cabanillas, sued his doctors and several pharmaceutical companies, saying the antidepressants he was taking caused him to jump in February 2005.

Suicide has become so much a part of the Tappan Zee that one supervisor, Ernie Feeney, has encountered three would-be suicides. Two he was able to keep from jumping. One he couldn't.

The Tappan Zee's grim allure is not hard to understand. Built on the cheap, its three-mile span is the least imposing of the region's major bridges, its low guardrails notoriously accessible to anyone with an inclination to climb over them.

And maybe there's a bond between the decaying bridge and the damaged souls who leap from it. The Tappan Zee remains in a state of endless patching and filling while politicians dither over how and when to replace it. Just a week ago, morning traffic was backed up for miles as workers repaired one of its infamous "punch-throughs," holes in the bridge so egregious you can see the water below.

Chances are, like the bridge, those who jump have their own gaping tears — punch-throughs involving love, money, careers — psychic holes too big to fix.

So far nothing has helped make it less alluring to would-be suicides. Four suicide hot line telephones were installed last year, on both ends of the bridge. None have been used. Still, a \$147 million redecking project to be completed by 2009 will increase the height of the side barriers and make it much harder to jump from the bridge.

Dr. Frederick T. Zugibe, who retired two years ago after 35 years as Rockland County medical examiner, said he did examinations of at least 30 suicides from the bridge. There is nothing remotely romantic about that final leap, he said. "When you hit the surface of the water from that height, it's like hitting rock," he said.

But whether higher barriers will deter suicides or just send troubled people elsewhere, whether there's a patch for souls as reliable as the one for roadbeds, that's another question entirely.

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