

The Hanging Pier

by Gabino Vidal Travassos

Martin Locke nudged himself forward until his toes hung precariously over the edge of the bridge-deck. He had often wondered why there wasn't a one-way pier running straight out into Puget Sound from the coast. It would have been very popular. "My father would have liked it," Martin thought. Half a mile out into the Sound the water takes on a sinister, black, and bottomless look. Or maybe that was just the way Martin saw it - inviting him in to drink his fill.

But he wasn't at that pier. He had imagined building such a magnificent pier as a child. "An engineer," his parents had always decided would be his true vocation. Spying on him as a small, skinny boy, sitting alone in his room, drawing a bridge one day, or maybe a pier the next, they decided he would be an architect. He never drew any people, just a bridge, or a pier. "He likes the ocean," they concluded.

His father had always liked the water as well. As Martin grew up there were an endless succession of weekends at the nearby lakes, rivers, or beaches. "Swimming, my dear Martin," his father always repeated, "is unnatural. People don't belong in the water, but just by mastering it, you're defying Nature, who'd just as much like you at the bottom of the water as above it." For a seven year old kid, this was beyond Martin's comprehension. But over the years, every time his face broke above the water surface was a personal coup, a slap in the face of Mother Nature, who waited patiently at the lake-bottom. It was the same Mother Nature who'd lured Martin's father into Puget Sound the year before.

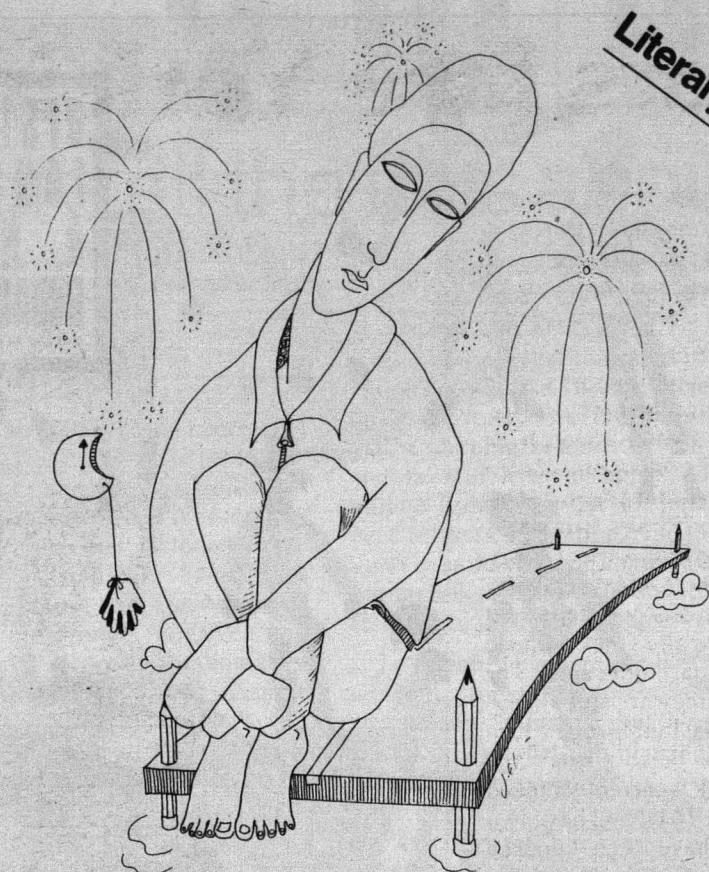
Why his parents divorced Martin never understood. Standing on the bridge-deck,

thinking about his father lying on the ocean floor, a hand about Mother Nature's waist, the two of them calling for him, made Martin's heart leap into the water below, indifferent to whether the rest of his body was following. His father's invitation came bubbling to the surface: "There is a better place for us, Martin. There must be."

His mother had said she was leaving the marriage, which he didn't believe (she'd made this threat before) until she stormed out of the house, dragging Martin behind her. Three months later Robert Locke stopped defying Nature. Bubbles rose to the surface below the bridge, each breaking and releasing his voice: "Join me. Join me. Join us, Martin."

Martin's toes had gone numb by now. He had resigned himself to the fact that his gloves were frozen to the railing. "You can't take anything with you," his father often said. A car drove quickly by. The tires spun wildly on the bridge surface, making the car veer from side to side, often entering the lane of opposing traffic. The sound of playful screams and yells from inside the car caused Martin to watch, just as an emptied bottle left through the passenger window, dropping slowly through the icy air into the water below. "Thanks, Martin," he could hear his father's voice inside his head. "I haven't had a nip of the hard stuff for quite some time." Three months, Martin finished. Three months.

It was New Year's Eve in Seattle, the night Martin Locke threw himself off the bridge, leaving his gloves, stuck to the railing, behind. The fireworks from the city's New Year celebrations were an inspiring backdrop as he lifted himself onto the railing, getting support from the vertical pillars. The night sky was lit up



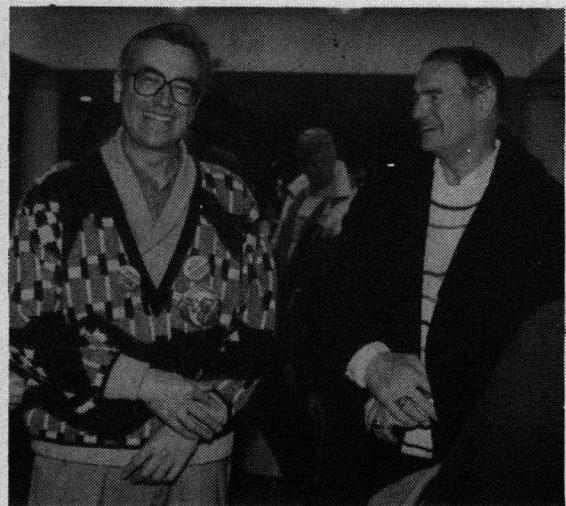
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with an infinity of colors. The bubbles broke from the water below with a frenzy, his father's voice thick in his mind. He glanced quickly over the note he had brought. It had been hastily scrawled in red: "I've thought about life and I've thought about death, and neither one particularly appeals to me" — Morrissey. He tucked it back into his inner coat pocket, and dropped into the darkness below.

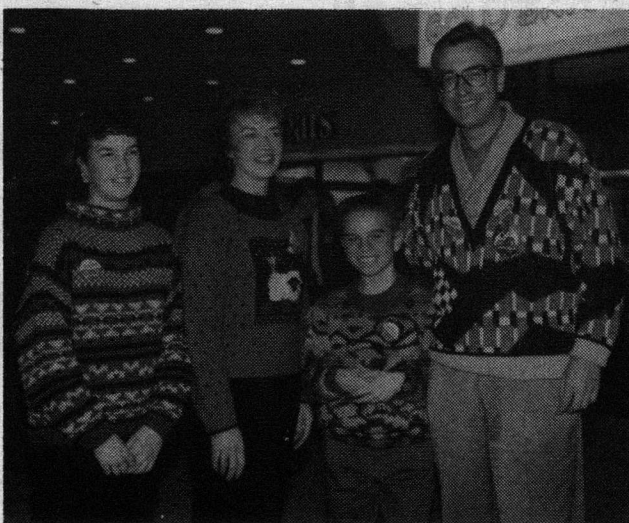
Every year, like the Muslims returning to Mecca to make the pilgrimage to Medina, Martin returns to the same bridge on New Year's Eve. He brings with him a bottle of rum (his father's favorite), the same gnarled note, and another pair of gloves which he leaves stuck to the rail. He laughs now when reminded of the story. "I

never could do anything right," he'd be quick to say, but if you looked at his family, his architectural engineering company's business, and the watery glow in his eyes, you could see his attempt at understatement is half-hearted. His wife is openly thankful that he didn't walk any farther along the bridge that day, when he was just a whelp of twenty. Every year when he returns, he finds the same place, thinks about life (then he thinks about death), then stands on the railing (his gloves are always frozen to the rail), and while the fireworks blaze triumphantly overhead, he drops into the bushes below. The bottle of rum, for his father, sits already at the bottom of the water, where he no doubt is waiting patiently for his son to join him one day. One day.

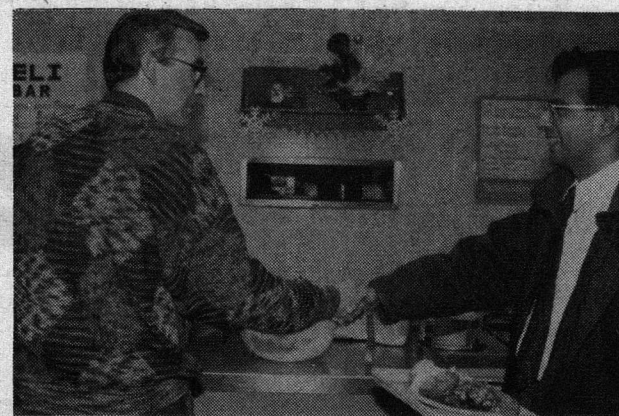
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