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REAL CHANGE

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On the Bridge: Pt. 3

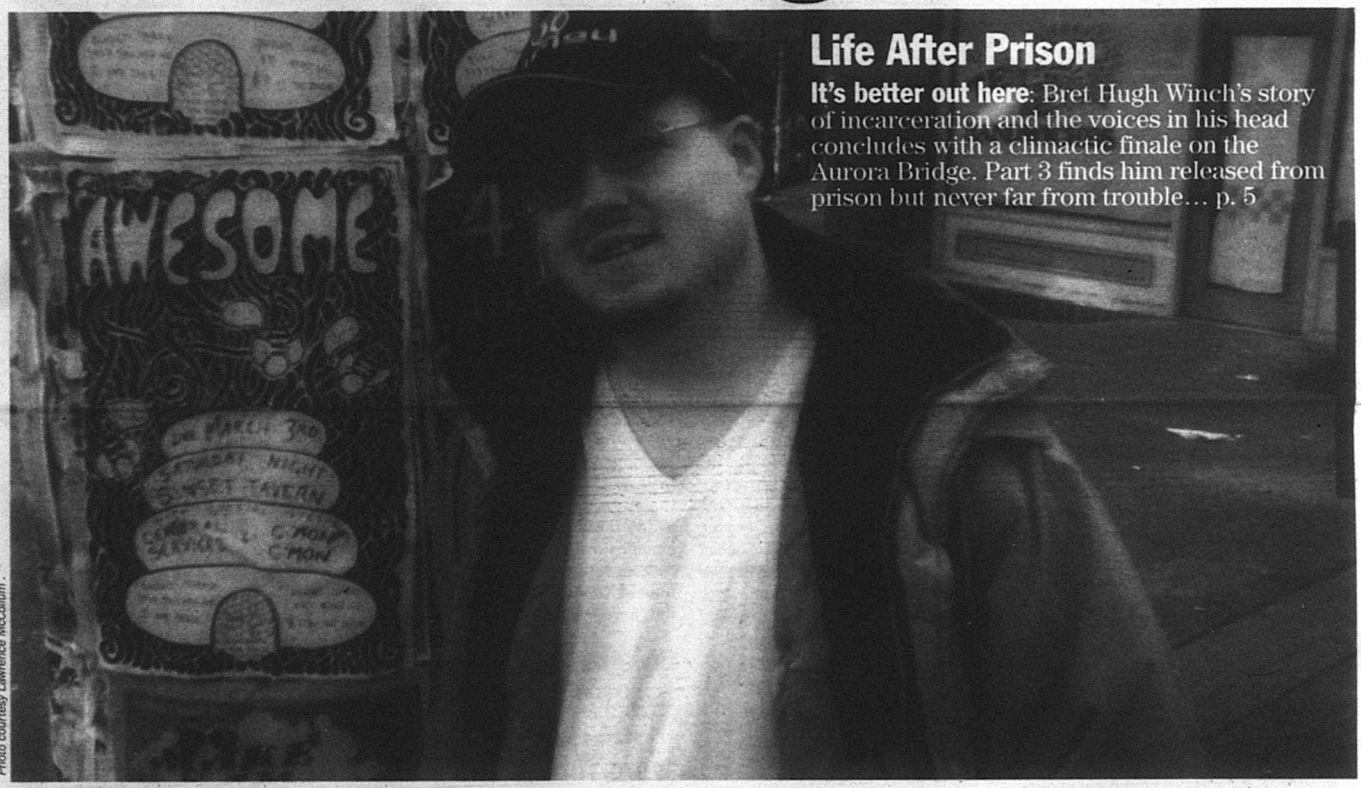

Photo courtesy Lawrence McCallum

Life After Prison

It's better out here: Bret Hugh Winch's story of incarceration and the voices in his head concludes with a climactic finale on the Aurora Bridge. Part 3 finds him released from prison but never far from trouble... p. 5

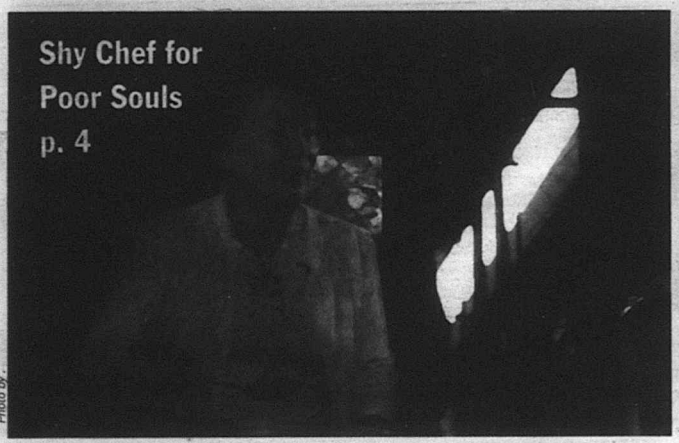

Photo by

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Your vendor buys this paper for 35c and keeps all the proceeds. Please purchase from badged vendors only.

What led Bret Hugh Winch to the Aurora Bridge last October?

In the last of a three-part series, Bret moves into his own place in Seattle. But when he faces potential homelessness, he makes a rash decision

The Man Who Stood on the Bridge

Pt. 3: Home, it's better than prison

By ROSETTE ROYALE,
Staff Reporter

A few hundred feet away from him, on the Aurora Bridge, police have stopped traffic. More than 120 ft. below him, on N. 34th St., cars slow down for a speed bump. Not a lot of cars, but a few. They look so small.

It's 10:21 in the morning and Bret Hugh Winch heaved one leg, then the other over the railing at least seven minutes ago. It could be longer. But not by much. That's around the time the ordeal on the bridge began.

Some construction workers see him. They're excavating a site just north of N. 34th. St. A white tower crane rises into the air like a toy made from an oversized erector set.

Don't do it, one of them yells. It's not worth it.

Standing 15 feet away from Bret, an officer. He's tried to move closer, but Bret told him not to. He's tried to get Bret to climb back over the 42-inch rail, but, no way, he won't do it.

Bret tells the officer he's on Department of Corrections Escape Status, he's a Level 3 sex offender, he has no place to live, he has no job.

Is that why? Does this explain why he's come here today, on Oct. 17, 2007? Are the reasons for considering suicide this easy to comprehend?

But what if Bret is wrong about being homeless? What if his PO, this very minute, is working to secure him housing?

Bret holds a cell phone to one ear, talking to a friend. The friend knows Bret is on a bridge, but doesn't know which one.

Seattle has more than 150 bridges. Hundreds of overpasses, too. The friend tries an overpass to the interstate near the Seattle Community Justice Center, the parole office. He's about five miles off the mark.

Bret left the justice center not even an hour ago. He'd been kicked out of his apartment and he needed help from his parole officer to get a new place. That's why he tells the officer on the bridge he's homeless.

At least, this is what Bret thinks. But what if he's wrong? What if his PO, this very minute, is working to secure him housing? Would Bret still be here?

He has a lot competing for his attention. Construction workers. His friend on the phone. The officer nearby. His own thoughts.

These thoughts cause him to hear voices that tell him to hurt himself. These thoughts cause him to see demons that hiss and snarl.

All of these people, these hallucinations are with Bret as he stands on the bridge. But by 10:22 a.m., everything will shift.

And that moment is a mere heartbeat away.

Bret saw his new place and thought: *"It definitely beats being in prison."*

It was Nov. 1, 2006 and he'd just been released from Twin Rivers, a state prison that houses a Sex Offender Treatment Program. It had taken more than 12 months and several hundred hours of treatment. And now, here he was. In his own place.

Randy Van Zandt, Bret's parole officer, had met the 23-year-old at the prison's front doors earlier that morning and driven him into Seattle. Van Zandt specialized in overseeing offenders confronting chronic mental illness and Bret fit the bill: Bret had told friends he had schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. A prison psychiatric exam diagnosed him with unspecified psychosis.

His new offender, Van Zandt saw, was high maintenance and would require a lot of hand holding. "Bret was someone who benefited a lot with someone walking through things with him," says Van Zandt. The two were looking at a long walk together: Bret was slated to be under supervision for four years, until 2010.

The apartment was pretty small. Actually, it was a hotel room, in a 54-room no-tell hotel that rented by the week, even to Level 2 sex offenders like Bret. Forty-six of the rooms shared bathrooms and showers that lay at the eastern end of each floor. The rooms came with a bed, a mini-fridge, a microwave, a table, and a couple of chairs.

The manager gave Bret a key to Room 107. Outside his southern-facing window, an alleyway strewn with broken bottles. In his building, drug deals took place through ground-floor windows. Prostitutes climbed through to meet their johns. Tenants left porn mags in the shared bathrooms.

Out on the street, police cars, with sirens blaring, made regular appearances.

The view from the ledge of the Aurora Bridge, looking down to N. 34th St., some 130 ft. below. *Photo by Joel Turner*

Ambulances took people away on stretchers. Arguments broke out into fistfights.

But, hey: it was home.

And finding a place to live as a registered sex offender is no easy feat. Most people don't think of sex offenders as good neighbors and landlords can be skittish about renting to them. For those with meager financial resources, like Bret, housing becomes even tougher. This may help to explain why, of the nearly 4,000 registered sex offenders in King County, 400 of them are homeless.

A fair number of offenders Bret had known at Twin Rivers lived in other rooms

Finding a place to live as a registered sex offender is no easy feat. Most people don't want one as a neighbor and landlords can be skittish about renting to one.

at the hotel. In prison, they noticed he opened and closed his eyes uncontrollably, so they gave him a nickname: Blinky. Bret hated the name. But it stuck.

Still, having people around proved good, because it meant Bret had company. He did whatever he could to keep anyone around, as another person nearby silenced the demons, sending the apparitions to the wall where they stood, mute.

Bret had described the demons to Lawrence McCollum, whom he'd met at Twin Rivers. They stood about three feet tall, floating just a few inches from the ground. Horns curved out of their heads. "To me," says McCollum, "they sounded like something out of Dante."

Their faces were humanoid and they snarled and hissed from angry mouths. Whether on the bus, at Safeway, or the justice center downtown, the demons were there. They were always there.

Nighttime, though: that was the worst. Alone, with no one around, the voices, the demons, they nearly overwhelmed him. Sometimes, they even invaded his dreams. He talked over his symptoms with his treatment program clinician, Judy McCullough, during a one-on-one session. She told him she'd email Van Zandt, his PO, who could forward his concerns to Sound Mental Health, where Bret went for his meds and mental health meetings.

He'd mentioned the voices to Clinton and Nancy Erckenbrack, too. The pastor-and-wife couple from southwestern Washington had cared for him when Bret was in his teens, right after his first-degree child molestation charge. He wrote them a letter, thanking them for their encouragement. God Bless You. "Would you consider coming to visit me in Seattle?" he asked.

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They wanted to, but their ministry was thriving. They couldn't get away. So he called them around Thanksgiving. Clinton spoke to him. "Just talk to the Lord," the pastor advised, "tell him your problems."

But in his new place, with his 24th birthday having come and gone, and with the possibility of spending Christmas with his mother and grandmother out of state growing dim, Bret stopped eating. Did he forget? Even with the canned spaghetti and junk food and soda around? His memory did fail him at times.

But five days before Christmas, McCullough got a phone call: Bret had been taken to the ER in an ambulance. After pumping him with IV fluids, Swedish Hospital sent Bret back to the tiny apartment, where the ever-present demons awaited. And so the holidays came and went.

Happy New Year.

Boundaries. Bret knew he had to set boundaries. But he just couldn't seem to do it.

In his room, he returned to a regular eating schedule. But the other tenants in the building kept coming by. Would he share some of his food? Sure, no problem. McCullough knew he wanted to be liked. "And with that," she says, "he was taken advantage of."

By the time the third week of January 2007 had rolled around, he only had $1 to his name. Did he have enough food left? He told McCullough he thought he did.

Still, the money. She wanted him to work on his money management. Thanks to a program called the Mentally Ill Offender Community Transition Program, his rent — $165 a week, reduced to $150 — and mental health treatments were covered. But social services only gave him $226 a month and a bus pass.

Bret thought if he had another $100 a month, he'd be fine. Maybe he could donate plasma. Was that a good idea? His treatment providers worried the procedure might affect his meds. Besides, what did he need the money for?

Things. Like a new pre-paid cell phone. And a used laptop. And CD's. He already had hundreds of them, all categorized, alphabetically, in his tidy room. Of course, the dopest ones had been dropped by the Real Slim Shady himself, Eminem. Bret loved Eminem. He gave him mad props. Sometimes, with the baseball caps and hoodies, he tried to emulate the look of the hip-hop star who had attempted suicide once himself.

Bret's mother bought him a new stereo with huge speakers. He would turn the system up and let it rip. Of course, not everyone was in the mood for Eminem's illin' rhymes. Tenants complained, a manager warned him about the volume. So he got headphones to keep the bass line up close to his ears. All the better to drown out the voices.

Though, when it came to boundaries, he had one he tried to enforce: his living space. He wanted to move. Even with the friends he knew there, the hotel wasn't the best place for him. Stuff kept happening.

A prostitute, let in the building by a john, was curious: Did Bret want a little action? In treatment, he'd addressed what appropriate sexual conduct looked like for him. A partner, with the house and the white picket fence, that's what he longed for. The prostitute did not fit the picture, so he told her no.

He dreamed of a place in the University District that took offenders, where he'd visited a friend. His PO, Randy Van Zandt, agreed to set up an appointment with the landlord. It would take time.

Luckily for Bret, he'd played the waiting game before. Sure, he was impatient, even impulsive on occasion. But he'd had to wait three and a half years in various state prisons before entering the treatment program at Twin Rivers. He would have to hold on again.

To keep himself occupied, Bret visited Sound Mental Health five days a week to get his meds and to take part in meetings. His Friday visit provided medication for the whole weekend. But sometimes, he suffered side effects.

The pills caused him to gain weight. Occasionally, he became constipated. Worse than both of these, however, he couldn't sleep. He'd stay up until the wee hours, playing video games. Being a night owl kept him from getting to his Sound Mental Health appointments on time.

Van Zandt could see how insomnia wore on Bret. He was lethargic, forgetful. You need to start prioritizing awake time, the PO told him, so you can get things done in the day. Bret did his best.

Even though she knew of his child molestation charge, she didn't see him as a bad person. Actually, she found him precious. She wanted to help him up the road to something better for himself. So, yes, he could stay.

But Clarke had rules. Strict rules. No drugs, no drinking, no overnight guests. "We make sure the rules are obeyed," she says. There were other tenants there, broken people, and she couldn't jeopardize all of them for one person's actions.

In some ways, the hotel and the new place had similarities. Both had private rooms with a bathroom down the hall. But Clarke's place was cheaper — almost by half — the rooms were bigger, and nicer, and there was a communal kitchen. One night Bret heated up some food for himself. He ate his meal.

Soon after, another tenant smelled something: gas. A fire truck came and evacuated the whole house. No one could reenter for hours, until well after midnight. The manager pieced together that Bret had forgotten to turn off the burner completely. He could've blown the whole house up.

Bret still had to attend his Monday evening treatment meetings and Sound Mental Health appointments, even though he lived two bus rides away. But he became adept at riding the bus, and he rode them to malls, down to Southcenter, up to Northgate.

He decided to head to north Seattle on a shopping trip. The bus traveled north up Aurora Ave. And there it was: the Aurora Bridge.

Randy Van Zandt served as Bret's parole officer. He saw Bret in his office, before he headed to the Aurora Bridge. *Photo by Joel Turner*

And then, in May 2007: his dream was answered. An apartment in the University District house had opened up. Finally, he could leave the seedy hotel and move on to something new, something better. Bret felt ready.

Body English. That's what Carol Clarke read. People's body English.

When Bret had come in with Van Zandt for a standard interview in March 2007, Clarke sat and watched him. For close to 20 years, she'd been renting spaces to sex offenders, including those rated Level 3, the most serious designation. Somewhere close to 100 offenders had rented from her over that time, and she'd had some wonderful successes. Maybe Bret could be another.

Did he know that since it had been built, more than 230 people had jumped to their deaths from this place? That only one other bridge in the country saw more suicides? Perhaps. But when he crossed over Lake Union, he knew. This would be the place. He told a friend at the hotel about it.

When Bret wasn't out looking for something to buy, he'd head downtown and talk to people. That included his peeps at the hotel. "Hey, homeskillet," he was fond of saying. "What's crack-a-lating?"

Yet the situation at the hotel hadn't changed. People still sought out ways to make fast money or get the quick fix. These attitudes coupled perfectly with Bret's desire to help out anyone he could.

That's how he met the woman in the SUV. She pulled up outside the hotel and got his attention. Then she took him for a ride. By the time it was over, she'd drained him of more than $400, getting him to cash hot checks.

"He fell for that kind of stuff," says Clarke.

Still, he befriended those he saw in need and, in August 2007, he encountered another woman, this one at Sound Mental Health.

He'd gone there for a meeting. When they talked, she told him she'd gotten out of

Bret went down to the justice center and handed over the keys to his place. He was put in handcuffs.

Western State Hospital, a psychiatric institution. Bret had been there, too, right after his child molestation charge. They'd decided he was mentally competent to stand trial.

The woman, released to the streets, was homeless. Bret had been kicked out by his stepdad as well. They bussed back to his place.

He closed the door and they hung out for a while. Sometime later, inside his room, she started screaming she was being attacked. The police were called.

Clarke doesn't believe Bret did anything to harm the young woman. His clinician, Judy McCullough, says the consensus among his providers is that Bret was innocent of assaulting his guest. "That just doesn't fit what you'd think of with Bret," says McCullough. And police and staff at Sound Mental Health never identified the alleged victim.

Even though Bret said nothing happened, he had broken a house rule: no uninvited guests. Add that to leaving the gas on and a few noise complaints, and Clarke was left with no choice. Even as much as it hurt her, she had to evict him. "I've learned the hard way," she says. "I can't save everybody."

By no longer having a legal address at Clarke's, Bret violated a condition of his housing program. That meant the Department of Corrections had no choice either: Bret had to be arrested.

Bret went down to the justice center and handed over the keys to Clarke's place. They put him in handcuffs, then took him to the King County Jail. He'd been out of prison for only nine months. Now he was locked up again.

Messed up. Everything. Was weird. And messed. Up.

When he got out of jail 12 days later, Bret couldn't figure out what was happening: his mind, he couldn't concentrate. He called his friend Lawrence McCollum.

He told McCollum he hadn't received any of his meds while in jail and couldn't find his way home. McCollum stayed on the phone with Bret while he rode the bus from downtown.

Though jail may seem like an extreme response to the violation, Van Zandt says that at least there, people could keep an

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eye on Bret. For him, that was better than being homeless. "He sat in jail," Van Zandt admits, "until we found his housing."

The hotel. Bret moved back into his old room. As soon as he checked in, he went to Sound Mental Health to see his treatment provider. He had to get his meds straightened out. And as his drug regimen changed, so did Bret.

For a while, he became obsessed with horizontal lines. He might be looking at someone and then, a horizontal surface — a window sill, say, or the top edge of an open laptop — would catch his eye. From the person, to the horizontal line, the person, the line. Back and forth his vision would bounce, until his eyesight would land on the horizontal surface and linger...for a second...or two...or thr — and then he'd snap out of it. Until it happened again. Mental health providers tweaked his prescription.

By mid-September 2007, he still couldn't find the right regimen. Van Zandt listened as Bret sat in his office, amped up. Bret's hallucinations were scaring him, and the insomnia, it had gotten worse. Van Zandt suggested another visit to Sound Mental Health, along with watching his diet and sleep. When that didn't work, Bret returned to the clinic for an emergency visit.

The next day, he missed his appointment with his treatment group. For months, he'd been working on integrating back into the community. He'd re-examined the charge that had led him to prison, and established more empathy for his victim. Group was important. His clinician, Judy McCullough, wanted to know why he hadn't shown up.

With October's arrival, Bret had to re-register as a sex offender, because he moved down the hall.

Because, he said, he'd signed an unknown man into the building, who then accused Bret of stealing his cell phone. Bret confronted him and the man raised his hand, threatening to hit him. His stepfather used to do the same. Afraid he would be hurt, Bret dared not leave his room.

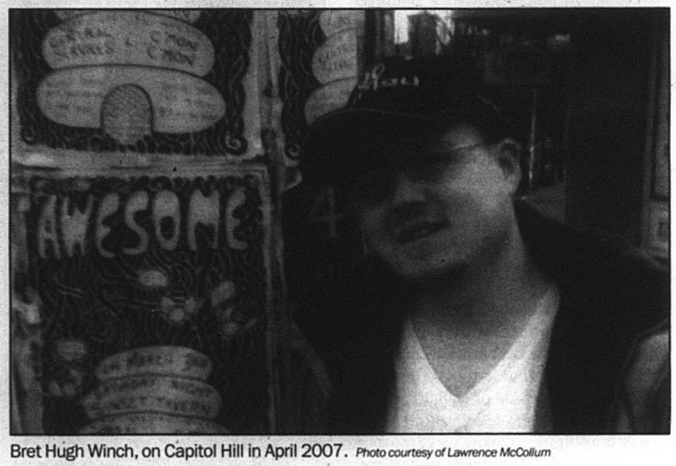
Boundaries, McCullough reminded him. "You are not setting appropriate external boundaries." His mental health case manager felt the same.

With October's arrival, Bret had to re-register as a sex offender, because he moved down the hall, into Room 111. The same size as the room he'd just left, it sat closer to the bathroom and showers. And while the room didn't pose a problem, someone he'd met on his journeys did.

A male transvestite had been harassing Bret. He told some friends about it, and they suggested he ignore him and not to let him in his room. The transvestite called Bret's phone instead. Bret worried that the person would say he'd done something wrong, get him trouble, even wind up having Bret thrown back in jail. He told his treatment group he didn't want that. He'd rather kill himself.

Throughout that night, suicidal thoughts ran wild in his mind. When he saw Van Zandt the next morning, the PO suggested Bret call the Crisis Clinic hotline, or perhaps consider hospitalization. But what about the harasser? Bret wondered. If he got in trouble, he could wind up in jail again. And might be raped. Again. Van Zandt offered to help with a no-contact order.

On Fri., Oct. 12, 2007, Bret missed his meds pick-up appointment at Sound Mental Health. When his friend Lawrence McCollum spoke to him on Sun., Oct. 14, Bret was in a manic phase, going 100 mph. McCollum had seen or heard him in similar states, so he hoped Bret would be able to recover, the same as before. "I had no reason to believe that he wouldn't," McCollum says.



Bret Hugh Winch, on Capitol Hill in April 2007. *Photo courtesy of Lawrence McCollum*

And it seemed McCollum was right. People who saw Bret that Monday and Tuesday thought he seemed OK, normal. Except for Van Zandt.

Bret came by to see him on Tues., Oct. 16. He still hadn't picked up his meds. It had been six days. Not taking his medication amounted to a violation, Van Zandt told him. He had to do it. Van Zandt wanted him to come back in two days, to check in. Bret said he would.

But Bret couldn't wait that long. Instead, he showed up the next day.

Wednesday, Oct. 17, 2007.

Bret came down to the Seattle Community Justice Center at 8 a.m. and sat in the day room. He had to talk to Van Zandt.

In Van Zandt's office, he took a seat. Something had happened at the hotel last night. Van Zandt focused on Bret, while he explained.

He'd had an altercation with one of the hotel managers. They'd known each other in prison and now, on the outside, as manager, he kept bothering Bret. He had come into his room before and hugged Bret, not letting go. Another time, he lay on Bret's bed and pulled Bret on top him. Bret had to fight to get away.

Friends had told Bret to ignore the manager, so he tried. Then last night, the manager wanted to know why he was getting the cold shoulder. Bret fled to his room. The manager stormed down the hall. "I'll beat your ass," he shouted. The manager went back to the office. Bret locked himself in his room. The manager returned and beat on Bret's door. Inside, afraid, Bret called 911. The police arrived.

But the hotel landlord didn't want cops around. "It's easier to find people to live here than it is to find people to work here," the landlord said. That meant Bret was out. He had until noon the next day.

It was the next day. By the time Bret finished the story, it was going on 9 a.m. He had three hours left to move.

I don't want to be homeless, Bret told Van Zandt.

Van Zandt didn't either. He suggested they come up with a contingency plan, maybe have Bret stay in a motel for the short term.

If worse came to worse, Bret offered to sleep under the overpass to Interstate 5, right outside the justice center. That way, he'd be there first thing every morning.

Van Zandt was surprised. Bret seemed willing to work out the problem. Though he did appear nervous, a little distraught, it looked like Bret needed less hand-holding.

But Van Zandt wanted to verify Bret's story. If he'd really been thrown out, he could face jail time again for breaking his housing condition. Van Zandt didn't want to arrest him. But he didn't want to get Bret's hopes up either and tell Bret he'd be able to move back in to the hotel. What should he do? Van Zandt decided to try find him a place to live. Fast.

He couldn't do it with Bret sitting in the office, though. So he suggested Bret hang out in the day room, even if meant waiting for hours. "We're going to figure this out," Van Zandt assured him. Bret seemed relieved.

The clock read just past nine.

Back in his office, Van Zandt got on the phone and started calling Bret's case manager and others who had worked with him. He wanted them all on board to advocate returning him to the hotel.

One of the people he wanted to speak to was Bret's clinician, Judy McCullough, and she came to work not too long after 9 a.m. She saw Bret sitting in the day room, acknowledged him, then went to her office, around the corner from Van Zandt's.

Van Zandt told her the story. Would she work with him to put a plan together to advocate for Bret? Of course, McCullough said.

In looking at the options, Van Zandt considered putting Bret in a motel. He knew of one on Aurora Ave. It wasn't a great place, but still. "A lousy place is a place," he says.

Around 9:15 a.m., he went out to the day room, looking for Bret. He wasn't there. Van Zandt returned to his office to work the phones. He wasn't worried. Maybe Bret had gone to get his meds or a bite to eat. He'd be back. Van Zandt was sure of it.

No one sees Bret leave the justice center. No one pays attention to the clock. But sometime after 9:15 a.m., on Oct. 17, 2007, he begins his journey to the Aurora Bridge.

He heads for a bus stop. There are two situated nearby and both have buses going his way. To make it in time, he boards a bus that leaves no later than 9:39 a.m. The bus heads downtown.

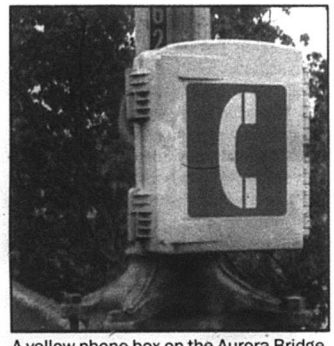
From the corner of Fourth Ave. S. and Royal Brougham Way, near where the bus stops are located, there's no direct route to the Aurora Bridge. Somewhere downtown, maybe near the Pike St./Pine St. corridor, he has to make a transfer. But which bus from there?

Two buses travel north across the Aurora Bridge, but only one stops near its northern entrance. The 5. Maybe he catches the 5 that arrives at Winslow Pl. N. and N. 38th St. at 10:09 a.m.

From here, he can walk west along N. 38th St. and pass under Aurora Ave. He can wait for the Walk signal, then cross to the sidewalk on Fremont Way N., just before the bridge's northwestern entrance. Even with the light, the walk takes no more than a minute.

Then what? The sidewalk becomes a pedestrian walkway leading to the Aurora Bridge. A plaque proclaims the bridge's true name: the George Washington Memorial Bridge, dedicated in February 1932.

A rail is the only physical barrier that keeps a pedestrian from walking right off the bridge. Rising from the rail are light poles. Attached to one is a yellow phone box.


A yellow phone box on the Aurora Bridge. Inside, buttons dial either the 24-hr Suicide Crisis Line or 911. *Photo by Joel Turner*

Two red buttons inside dial the 24-hr Suicide Crisis Line or 911. Below the rail, a sign reads, "SUICIDAL?", with a phone number.

Further south along the walkway, another "SUICIDAL?" sign. To its left, a light pole. Ten paces south of the light pole, outside of the rail, a section of the 7.5-inch-wide ledge.

The 42-inch-high rail is too tall for the 5'5" Bret to clear easily. He must have to maneuver one leg, then the other over it,

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before he secures his footing. Does he fear he'll slip and fall onto N. 34th St. below?

The walk from the bus stop, to the bridge's northern entrance to this section of the bridge takes just over five minutes.

And when does Bret arrive here? No one knows.

But at 10:14 a.m., Bret calls a friend who doesn't answer. He leaves a message.

At 10:15 a.m., Bret calls another friend. He tells him he's on a bridge. Soon, the friend drives to the overpass near the justice center to find him.

At 10:16 a.m., Bret stands on the bridge.

10:17 a.m.: The police station receives a call that a man has threatened to kill himself. The station dispatches a cruiser.

10:18 a.m.: The cruiser arrives. An officer approaches Bret along the pedestrian walkway.

10:19 a.m.: The officer gets within 15 ft. Don't come closer, Bret tells him.

10:20 a.m.: Divers are called in.

10:21 a.m.: Don't do it, it's not worth it, a construction worker yells.

10:22 a.m.: Bret holds his cell phone to his ear with one hand.

He grasps the rail with the other.

The officer stands close by.

Bret takes a look around him.

He mumbles something. To the voices, perhaps? The demons?

He lets go of the rail.

He leaps.

And falls, headfirst, into the mid-morning air.

One.

Two.

Thr—

That's about how long it takes him to fall. Not even three seconds.

His body plummets roughly 130 ft. before striking the pavement of N. 34th St. He attains a speed of approximately 60 mph.

Witnesses liken the sound to a bag of melons dropped from a great height. A burlap sack filled with potatoes and water and bones. A huge drum, but much louder, much more percussive than can be imagined. Like something you'd never want to hear again.

And the sight? No one wants to talk about it.

Bret sustains skull, rib, pelvic, and vertebral fractures, with lacerations of the brain, lungs, liver, spleen, and aorta.

No one considers resuscitation, because death comes— one, two, thr—

Instantly.

The phone rang in Randy Van Zandt's office at approximately 10:45 a.m. He picked up to hear Bret's case manager. A friend of Bret's had called her to say Bret was on a bridge somewhere. That's all she knew. Van Zandt sat in his chair and thought: But he was just here.

By 10:53 a.m., the friend on the phone told police all that he knew. The police didn't tell him Bret had jumped.

Almost two hours later, Van Zandt's phone rang again. The case manager. She'd spoken to the medical examiner. Van Zandt hung up. He prepared to meet with Bret's treatment team to discuss the events of the day.

Early that afternoon, a chaplain from the police station met with construction workers who saw Bret fall. He counseled them in a spare office in the Adobe building, on the south side of N. 34th St.

On Thurs., Oct. 18, while at work, Bret's good friend Lawrence McCollum saw a co-worker. He looked upset. What's wrong? McCollum asked. Didn't you hear? the associate asked. Hear what? When he told him, McCollum cried so much, his boss sent him home.

Some of the construction workers were still in shock. The company brought in a grief counselor.

The next week, in the chapel at Twin Rivers, home to a state prison Sex Offender Treatment Program, offenders gathered to remember Bret.

On Wed., Oct. 24, Sound Mental Health held a memorial. Close to 50 people attended, including Van Zandt, Bret's clinician, Judy McCullough, his uncle Raymond Shoquist, and Lawrence McCollum. Bret's mother and grandmother came from out of state. His mother was so grief stricken, she couldn't speak.

The pastor-and-wife couple, Clinton and Nancy Erckenbrack, who cared for Bret in southwestern Washington after his charge, didn't attend. They had no idea a memorial had taken place. They mailed Bret a letter at the hotel. It came back returned. They called. His number had been disconnected.

To write this series, staff reporter Rosette Royale obtained close to 600 pages of documents from the Department of Corrections (DOC) through multiple public disclosure requests. Supporting documentation was also obtained through numerous websites. Interviews were conducted with more than 20 individuals, including family, friends, former prisoners, mental-health professionals, and DOC personnel.

Any quotes attributed to Bret derive from DOC documents where he was directly quoted by others, department forms written in his own hand, or letters he'd mailed. Thoughts attributed to him stem from descriptions others made of him, whether in interviews or as part of DOC documents.

Descriptions of Longview and Kelso, WA, the Lewis and Clark Bridge, the home of Nancy and Clinton Erckenbrack come from a one-day visit the reporter made to southwestern Washington. Descriptions of Twin Rivers come from two separate visits to the prison made this past spring and summer. Descriptions of the Capitol Hill hotel he lived in upon his release are based upon numerous firsthand visits.

Descriptions of the Aurora Bridge and surrounding areas are based upon multiple firsthand visits the reporter made to the site. Measurements of the bridge either come from various websites or were ascertained through measurements conducted by the reporter himself. Other descriptions of Bret or his environs are based upon the memories of those who knew him.

The narrative of the last moments on the bridge stems from interviews, a police report of the incident, and a "Computer Assisted Dispatch," a transcript of law enforcement communication in relation to the incident.

The series got its genesis from a police incident report printed in the Street Watch column of *Real Change* last autumn. The entire reporting process lasted more than seven months.

A pedestrian walks along N. 34th St. In an area nearby, Bret's friend Lawrence McCollum spread seeds to remember him by. *Photo by Joel Turner*

It took Lawrence McCollum months to muster the courage to visit the Aurora Bridge. It was a beautiful day. Sunny and warm.

They began to have a bad feeling. Clinton mailed another letter to the hotel, looking for Bret. He was gone, someone replied, no one knew where. In late March 2008, a friend told the couple what had happened. Just what they had feared.

Autumn tightens into winter. Spring unfolds into summer. And the Erckenbracks haven't stopped thinking about Bret. Yes, they knew he was needy, and yes, he had troubles and was impulsive. But he had the laughter of a 14-year-old.

In their eyes, he didn't commit suicide because he wanted to. He did it because he was scared. And, sure, some people may view his suicide as a sin, but what if he had cancer that had been eating him all up? People would understand that, wouldn't they?

Besides, Nancy knows God to be merciful. "I don't believe God is cruel," she says. "He never made hell for us."

Randy Van Zandt's thoughts turn to Bret often. When he looks back, he wonders if he should have arrested Bret that day he came in, in need of a new place. He doesn't blame himself. He feels he tried to help Bret the best he could. How could he have known he'd go to the bridge?

But every once in a while, he imagines what might have happened if things had gone another way. After all, Bret had been right next to him. Just inches away. "If I had decided to arrest him," he says, "he may be sitting in this chair with us."

For a while, Lawrence McCollum had slipped into depression. But now he's pulled out of it. And it's taken him months to muster the courage to visit the Aurora Bridge. A friend went with him.

It was a beautiful day. Sunny and warm. Under the bridge, near the water, people jogged and rode bikes. McCollum found a spot nearby and spread some seeds. Bachelor buttons and Johnny jump-ups.

Then he walked on the bridge himself and found it…not so much peaceful, but different than he expected. He thought about the people he could see below enjoying the day, close to where he'd seeded the ground. He realized they didn't know they didn't know Bret. They didn't know what had happened there.

But that's always the case. Anywhere you go, he says, there's no telling what happened before in that same place. You could be having the worst day you could imagine, while someone nearby could be falling in love. "Life goes on," he says. "This is the case everywhere."

As McCollum left the Aurora Bridge, thinking, fondly, of Bret, the people below enjoyed their afternoon, the traffic raced north and south, drivers and passengers heading to countless destinations. McCollum holds on to the memory of that day.

And life, it goes on. ■