

A freak of nature had foiled the man's suicide attempt—and now he wanted to live

BY HELEN O'NEILL

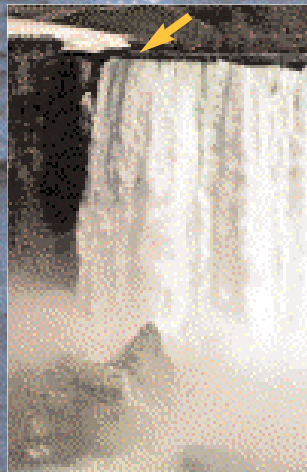
THE CALL came to the police just after 5pm on March 19, 2003. "Man on the ice at Terrapin Point."

Sergeant Patrick Moriarty, head of the emergency rescue team of New York State Park Police, grabbed his jacket, shouted for the rescue truck, hopped into his patrol car and sped the short distance to the scene.

Terrapin Point juts out over the American side of Niagara Falls, which curves some 730 yards between the US and Canada. In summer, it is a favourite spot for tourists. In winter, it's transformed into a treacherous embankment—a mountain of ice and snow that blankets everything.

Moriarty assumed he was

On ^{the} ^{of} Brink Niagara



Inset:
Terrapin
Point

'God must be holding him in

about to rescue a tourist. He wasn't prepared for what he found.

"He's in the water!" shouted a park police officer who'd arrived moments before Moriarty. "He's right on the edge."

Moriarty gasped. In 19 years with the park police, he'd never seen anything like it. The man was trapped about 80 yards from shore, right at the edge of the falls. He wore a thin blue jacket, his hands jammed into his trouser pockets and his body crouched as if trying to steady himself against the enormous weight of the water rushing past. The water wasn't deep; it only came to his mid-thighs. But the current was savage, trying to drag him over.

"He'll be swept over any minute or just die of the cold," Moriarty thought. The water was half a degree C, the air temperature about ten degrees. The river was an angry mass, surging by at 19 miles an hour, carrying great chunks of ice. Conditions couldn't have been worse. A steep embankment sloped about 30 feet to the falls, light snow on top, the rest sheer ice. Slip and it's a toboggan ride to oblivion.

"Hang on!" Moriarty bellowed, waving at the victim. "We're coming for you!" There was no way the man could

hear him, but he turned in the rescuers' direction, forlorn and hopeless.

At 46, Moriarty was six foot four, all square-jawed determination and sharp-eyed intensity. He knew Niagara as well as anyone. He'd waded into the



A back-up safety line was set up for each man going into the water

rapids to save boaters, fishermen, those attempting suicide and injured hikers. But usually the victims were further upriver, where there wasn't the same danger of being swept away.

Moriarty whipped out his portable radio and called for the Erie County Sheriff's Department helicopter and as many firemen as the department could spare. Other police officers arrived, lugging equipment. Moriarty started zipping up the thick, orange rubber suit that would protect him from the cold. Someone would have

place,' said the fire chief

to go into the water and he had the most experience.

The fire department's battalion chief arrived. "God must be holding that guy in place," he said.

"The only thing holding him in place is fear," Moriarty replied.

Later, aerial photos would show there was a thin fissure in the rock that cut across the crest of the waterfall. The man had somehow jammed his feet into the crack moments before being swept over. That foothold now separated him from eternity.

DUSK WAS FALLING, the temperature dropping. Firefighter Gary Carella, 39, a veteran of 11 years, was getting ready to be lowered into the water with Moriarty. Smaller than Moriarty, he was wiry, with huge brown eyes and an innocent-looking face. But he was tough and had participated in almost as many rescues as Moriarty.

Four rope lines had been set up—a main line and a back-up safety line for each man—each about 250 feet long and anchored to a tree upriver. The ropes were attached to harnesses worn by Carella and Moriarty. Thick metal stabilising rods were hammered on to an ice shelf about 65 feet from the stranded man.

The fire chief ordered all 20 men on the ice to hook on to a rope line. They took their positions, spread evenly over the ice—some near the

tree, others further down the slope.

Twenty minutes had passed since the first rescuers arrived. The man looked paralysed with cold, but he was still standing, still bent against the spray. Sliding down the ice, Moriarty and Carella hit the spongy, rocky floor of the river and immediately felt the pull. The current was trying to tear them from their lifelines. The roaring falls drowned out conversation, so they relied on hand signals to communicate. The man was screaming at them through the mist.

A detective on the embankment above spotted a small dark bundle—a brown wallet and a dark baseball cap pierced with a pen. Stuck to the pen was a note. The handwriting was neat, the message short. "Please tell my parents I'm sorry."

EVEN AFTER 15 years of flying rescue missions here, a call to the falls still gave pilot Kevin Caffery chills. Everything about Niagara is unforgiving, from the blinding mist to the ferocious and wildly unpredictable up-draughts that burst from the brink, threatening to flip a helicopter over in an instant.

"Oh, my God, Artie," Caffery gasped to his partner in the cockpit as they neared the falls. "Look at where he is."

In the gathering dusk, the sight was almost otherworldly: a tiny, dark figure swaying in the maelstrom, trapped on the very brink of the falls. "How the

'I can't hold on much longer.

hell are we going to get this guy?" Art Litzinger said.

Far below, the pilots could make out two roped rescuers edging through the water towards the victim. They were hugging the bank, trying to fight the rapids.

Caffery edged the chopper towards the man, easing lower, closer. Hanging from the bottom of the helicopter was a steel rescue basket attached to a 30-foot rope. Suddenly, severe updraughts bounced the helicopter about, making it difficult to control. The mist was blinding. Caffery fought to steady the craft, and had to fly away and get rid of the basket and rope, which couldn't be used because of the updraughts. He flew two more sweeps before heading back to shore.

"We're coming back for you," Litzinger yelled, pushing his hands against the cockpit window in a thumbs-up sign.

For a second, the two men locked eyes. Litzinger will never forget the look on the man's face. "He thinks we've abandoned him," Litzinger cried.

IN THE water, Moriarty and Carella strained against their ropes. They were close enough to get a good look at the man now—sturdy, dark features, dark hair and a moustache.

Later they'd learn that he was 48 and had waded into the river despondent over hundreds of thousands in

gambling debts. He lived with his elderly parents in nearby Buffalo.

For now, they knew him only as the man on the brink. "I'm so cold," he kept crying out. "What have I done?"

"Hang in there," Moriarty shouted, trying to sound confident and strong.

But it was clear the man was giving up. At one point he checked his watch. He craned his neck and gazed down into the gorge—a long, agonised stare. Then he turned back to the rescuers with a kind of resigned shrug.

POWER COMPANIES had lowered the water level by eight inches by diverting water through their power plants a mile away.

Still, waves were crashing round the man's legs. Moriarty and Carella pushed forward and were only 30 feet from him when they reached an ice wall jutting from the shore. They tried to wade round it, but the current was too strong. An ice pick was lowered by rope and Moriarty started hacking, but the wall was too thick.

The rescuers needed a new plan—fast. They decided to attach a line to a lifebelt. Litzinger held one end of the line in the helicopter while men on shore held the other end. The pilots would lower the lifebelt in the hope that the man would catch it, and rescuers could then drag him ashore.

But there was no way to convey this to the victim. "I can't hold on much longer," he cried. "Help me!"

Help me!' the man cried

IN MINUTES the helicopter was back, the orange lifebelt swinging next to its pontoons. Litzinger leaned out as far as he could, spray hammering at his face.

Below, the man covered his face with his hands. He stumbled as the wash from the helicopter churned up waves that lashed against him. He was losing his foothold. The lifebelt was directly over his head, but the gusts were too strong. He fell face first, disappearing into the water.

"No!" Litzinger screamed.

Patrick Moriarty lunged forward, but the men on his rope held him back. Carella closed his eyes. He couldn't bear to look.

In the air, Caffery and Litzinger watched the blue speck of the man's jacket disappear. Some onlookers turned their heads. Others muttered prayers. No one had any doubt that they were watching the end.

And then a shout went up—a cry of disbelief that washed over rescuers

Police officers Patrick Moriarty (left) and firefighter Gary Carella refused to let Niagara claim another victim



JAMES NEISS

and the crowds that now lined the shore. In the mouth of the waterfall, the man was clawing his way back. It didn't seem possible and yet there he was, fighting the water with a brute strength born of fear, his legs dangling over the falls.

"He's back up!" Litzinger screamed.

Battered, drenched and terrified, the man was standing again, feet jammed back into the crevice that had held him above the falls all that time. His face was blue with cold.

"We have one more shot," Caffery shouted. "Just drop the lifebelt."

IT WAS a shot in a million—and everyone knew it—that Litzinger could pick precisely the right moment to drop the ring, that it would float directly to the man, that rescuers would be able to drag him to shore.

Leaning out as far as he could, Litzinger tried to gauge the currents. But he was so pummelled by wind and spray it was impossible to see anything. Blindly, he dropped the ring. It bobbed and twisted, a swirl of orange in a sea of foam.

The man lunged forward and topped once more. As the lifebelt swirled by his head and the falls started pulling him over, his right hand shot up. It looped round the lifebelt. "Oh, my God, he's got it!" Litzinger screamed.

In the water, Moriarty and Carella were screaming, too. "Pull! Pull! Pull!" The men on the rope line on shore pulled with all their might.

Then the victim disappeared

once again. "Stop!" Moriarty shouted.

The current had sucked the man under a thick shelf of ice overhanging the falls. He was just inches from being swept over, clinging to the ring that was now snagged beneath the shelf. His face was half-submerged in the torrent, his body tossed about violently as the water tried to pull him over.

There was just a thin space of about a foot between the ice and the raging water. Every few seconds the man's face surfaced in the space, gasping for air.

"More rope!" Moriarty and Carella shouted. "More rope!"

With the extra rope, Moriarty let the current drag him to the ice shelf, where he started punching a hole in the ice with his fist. He managed to grab four fingers of the man's hand. "Push!" Moriarty shouted. "Push with your feet. You have to help us."

"I can't." The man was choking on the water surging over his head. He was drowning before their eyes. "Let me go," he gasped. "Don't kill yourselves too."

"You're not going now," Carella screamed, pushing in from behind Moriarty and diving under the ice.

In the freezing, raging water, he grabbed the man's coat and wrestled his legs around his torso, trying to twist a safety harness round his shoulders. The current had both of them in its grip now, sucking them over.

Somehow Carella was able to lash the two of them together. "I've got him!" he sputtered as his

face burst up through the water.

"Pull!" Moriarty shouted again to the rescuers above, waving with both hands. "Pull!"

The two bodies shot up the embankment, the victim cradled in the arms of the firefighter. Other rescuers rushed down the slope and within seconds the man was being bundled into a warm suit on a stretcher. "I'm so sorry," he muttered. Then he passed out.

THE LEGACY of the man on the brink endures. Many of the rescuers say they'd like to meet him, shake his hand and praise him for his endurance.

In hospital, he was tearful, remorseful—and thankful. He swore he had been changed for life.

"I'm sorry," he kept saying. "I don't know what in the world I would do if someone had lost their life for me."

Rescuers say that is all the thanks they need.

NAMED AND SHAMED



A Bedford couple were thrilled by the arrival of their new son and duly named him Drew. Unfortunately, Russell Peacock and his partner Shetal didn't realise the full impact the little boy's monicker could have on his life until after they'd registered it.

Carrying out an Internet search for famous namesakes, the computer asked them, "Do you mean Droopy C--k?"

"It was as if I'd been smacked with a right hook," said Russell. "I started repeating 'Drew Peacock' over and over again. Then I thought—what have we done?"

Luckily, it was not too late to alter the birth registration. The little boy will now be known as "Tyler".

School computers in Norfolk have deemed the seemingly innocent Dick Whittington a peddler of Internet filth.

Helen McDermott, a director of OhYesItIz! theatre company, e-mailed 30 primary schools offering to perform a scene from a pantomime version of the tale free in assemblies. She was puzzled when she received only one reply.

When she checked with school secretaries, she was told that schools had not received the offer because their filtering system, designed to prevent youngsters seeing offensive material, had blocked the e-mails because of the "Dick" in the pantomime's title.

"It's PC gone mad," said Ms McDermott.