

The Stranger on the Bridge

According to the Mental Health Foundation, around 4,400 people end their own lives in England each year - and at least 10 times that number attempt suicide.

Jonny Benjamin fits into the latter statistic, but could just as easily have been in the former. Luckily, whilst attempting to jump off Waterloo Bridge, a passerby stopped and talked him out of it. *The Stranger on the Bridge* documents Jonny's journey, six years later, to find that man and thank him.

Seemingly simple at first, the plot follows Jonny as he starts a campaign to find "Mike" (#findmike). From TV interviews to newspaper coverage to handing out flyers on Waterloo Bridge, Jonny's search catches the attention of the nation. Soon, #findmike has gone viral on social media, and people are listening from almost every continent. Eventually, after many calls, emails and numerous wrong leads, 'Mike' (who actually turns out to be called Neil) gets in touch. We watch as the pair reunite, we potentially shed a tear or two, and you could say that's the end of it.

I disagree. For me, *The Stranger on the Bridge* has something revolutionary about it. The programme is much more than just a story about finding 'Mike' - it is about stripping away the taboo and talking about suicide head on. Living in London, I regularly hear about people jumping in front of trains, off buildings and bridges. I am also, therefore, witness to the many tuts and sighs from commuters, the "How selfish" comments, and the total lack of compassion - I, too, am guilty of this at times. These days, unless we are directly affected, we seem to have become somewhat immune to suicide. Most suicide attempts barely even make the news.

The Stranger on the Bridge rebels against this norm, and places the issue right in front of us. In his own words, Jonny explains why he tried to take his life, what his thoughts were at the time and how he felt then and since. This is information gold. How often do you get to hear from a survivor of suicide and learn from them directly? Jonny provides us with an accurate and real insight into the issue and, in doing so, offers the key to better understanding and help. Cleverly, the documentary withholds his schizophrenia diagnosis until the end, so we listen without potential preconceptions, labels or judgements. Instead, we watch him - emotional, distressed at times, but ultimately human, and very far from mistaken stereotypes of this condition.

Additionally, for those battling with suicidal thoughts and mental health conditions, the programme sends a strong message of "You can beat this". Jonny openly states that he still gets suicidal sometimes; he doesn't pretend that he has made a miraculous recovery. He fights against the thoughts and he finds a way through them. There is something hugely inspirational in this achievement. Moreover, Jonny has turned his rock bottom into a huge positive - educating people all over the world, helping those who have lost close ones to suicide, and saving the lives of many others. At the end, he says that one man has shown him that life is worth living, and that is Neil. Jonny does himself a disservice here - he is as much responsible for this too.

And, importantly, we need to be as well. It's time to stop walking on by. Be a Mike.

By Natalie Robins