

The Bridge

by Gary Justis

SH bridge 4 dusk

The Chicago River is an artery of great renown in the history of the city, and it connects the lower waterways that lead to the town of *Lockport* and beyond. Near the old neighborhood where I used to live, the river divides the district, from *Chinatown*, down through the Northern European neighborhood of *Pilsen*, and into the *South Loop* of the Chicago Center.

I had heard a story about horses that walked in a circle down by the Chicago River, in the days before the long winters of severe, cold machine labor. People in the oldest part of Chicago told me about these horses, who had lived and worked on the river in the early part of the 20th century. They were powerfully bred, trained and shod for sustained exertion to walk in a circle, for hours, down by the water.

I didn't know why there would have been horses by the river years ago, and I had no idea about the nature of their work. Some details of their tasks were told me by an old Polish woman, whom I had met on 18th Street one afternoon in 1977.

“These draft horses were strong, and they made a house fly. It came up above so many trees, and the children laughed...they still laugh...even after the horses were gone.”

She was smiling to herself. I thought she might be just a little seedy, but I wanted to hear more. Before I could get additional information, the bus came, she boarded, and she waved to me through the dirty back window as it drove away.

With numerous street people wanting attention in those days, I spent little time trying to make any sense of things those folks talked about. So many of them were obviously living in several realities, pulling along invisible lines of souls, with whom they shared the screams and fears of their many predicaments. It wasn't until later I discovered some of the crazy folks, like the old woman, were

articulate to a point where the designation of *Street Poet* could apply, protecting their savvy, practical nature in day-to-day survival.

I was nonetheless attached to the idea of a house that could fly.

With the small neighborhoods of Chicago, there are always scores of tiny businesses that flourish, especially the grocery markets. These shops keep everyone well satisfied in the trading of gossip, goods and general news. Bertha's grocery was one such place, an old storefront, where my many Latin neighbors gathered to talk about anything from cars, weddings, and feats of bravery, to visits from saints and other apparitions.

Many neighbors were first generation Mexicans, newly married, excited in a way that made the greatness of their city, our city, discernible in the quiet glory of their accomplishments. I quickly understood that having children was the greatest of these successes.

Most of the children in the neighborhood were bright and friendly. The dour kids were more discriminating, not quick to be trusting, but when they came to understand I had an agenda that was somewhat ambiguous, with a natural curiosity, they became articulate spokespersons. The little leaders directed much of the child's-play. They always played in mixed groups of boys and girls, unaffected by most environmental issues like weather, mean teenagers and gang-bangers, stray dogs, traffic and demanding grownups.

Easy amblings from my studio could get me to most destinations in the city. I loved to walk, especially in the mornings, as shopkeepers swept the soiled concrete in front of their business. Working people would catch up easily, cradling their morning coffee, nodding at

each other with a smile. This was a supremely grand time of day, each person rediscovering a manner to en-girdle the challenges of a new day. I locked all this activity into my brain, hoping it might set a tone for me as well.

When I crossed a vacant lot that sat adjacent to my studio one morning, I saw a group of neighborhood children standing in a small clearing, surrounded on several sides by tall trees, and shorter prairie shrubs. In this neighborhood, the children were fortunate to have lots to play in, away from traffic, with at least some vestige of nature in the many rabbits, squirrels, and birds that braved the inner city.

The children were very excited, shouting, jumping and carrying on in a way I'd not yet seen. Some were dressed in uniforms for school, so I knew they traveled as a group, and it was not some random kid disturbance. They saw me enter the lot. This seemed to increase the excitement, a few of them pointed and shrieked in delighted bursts, trying to direct my attention to the tops of the trees. I looked up,.....and the astonishment from the thing I saw turned the children's commotion to screams and hysterical laughter.

Above the tops of the trees, I saw a house, at some distance on, away from the treetops, suddenly rise up. It slowly stopped its ascent, hovered, with its bottom area partially obscured by leaves and branches, then slowly slipped down from view.

“OK,.....Wha?.....” I searched my mind for an explanation and a foggy memory started to form.

In that instant the children, all wildly laughing and jumping, ran around the trees, across the lot to Canal Street. I followed, trying hard not to affect the appearance of a chase. At the street's edge they stopped, I caught up as one of them pointed towards the river.

“Look Mister! Es cool haint it?”

There before us sat a giant, magnificent masterpiece of engineering. A rare *Vertical Lift Bridge*. This was a monster from another age. The Chicago River was crossed by this behemoth. It had two massive steel and limestone towers supporting a long, horizontal span, which held a small house in its center. The bridge had been making this house fly for over three generations.

Split-House Bridge 1 copy

“My dear God!.....” I marveled at the thought of this industrial wonder and its power to still conjure a miraculous event in the

minds of children, and the wayward Street Poets who wandered this quarter.

Later that year, I discovered I could walk down into the bridge's domain, the Amtrak yards, with no harassment from security people. Sometimes I would cross the great bridge on foot, over the Chicago River, taking up a path on the southern end. I always had Alexandra (Alex), my dog, with me. Once we were across, we would turn back north, walking through largely unused prairie, all the way from 18th Street south to the Downtown. This was a peaceful, unspoiled area. I later heard about the local boys in the 1960's, hunting pheasant in those lower reaches below the bridges. It was difficult to imagine shotguns in the hands of youths, in the city, securing game, while the cops ignored their small adventures.

After some months, I finally discovered the *Bridge Control House*. It held the electrical switches for the Great Bridge. Charles, the bridge operator, had an old stray dog, which lived in the Control House most of the time. Alex and the strange dog showed a mutual indifference towards each other.

"What's the dog's name Charles?" We always searched for things to talk about.

"*Horse*,.....and I know your gonna ask me why....." Charles turned to his radio and said something in some strange railroad code then looked at me, waiting for my curiosity to rise.

"OK." I genuinely was curious.

"Well,... when this bridge was built, there was a turnstile, with two giant draft horses. They pulled the works around to raise the bridge, when a barge was going under. They were named Horse 1 and Horse 2."

“Oh,.....that's what she meant,.....crap!”

The street lady's image came suddenly to mind, but I wanted to avoid a conversation about her, so I stayed with the dog conversation.

“And the dog.....is?.....”

“Right! Horse 3, but we shortened it to Horse.....who's this.....SHE?”

Charles looked as if he recognized something in my fuzzy recollection. I felt obliged to tell him.

“SHE..... was this Polish street lady who told me about this bridge.”

“What did she tell you?” Charles seemed to have some information. He waited for the context of my explanation to take form.

“She told me about the horses making a house fly.”

“Shit!.....Heh, heh,.....That's Elizabeth, and she is no street person. She's the mother of a big-time landlord in this area. Do you live around here? You probably rent from him. ”

“Yes, on 18th and Jefferson. In an old creamery.” I was a tiny bit reluctant to give the address.

“Ooh..... man! She lives above you, in an old apartment!She sees things.”

It was a strange coincidence, about the old woman. After I thought about it for some time, I came to believe part of the coincidence could be explained if we think of Chicago as a collection of small communities that border a finite body of fresh water. For the most part, it is a Lake Community, where people can come to know thousands of folks in the space of a lifetime. I could probably walk anywhere in the area, finding tons of people who were familiar with, or had dealings with Elizabeth.

I knew at that moment the storyteller and supreme sage of the neighborhood's generations of children lived above me. I wondered if she would talk with me again. I imagined her hovering, like the flying house of her half-made delusion.

During the first snowfall of that year, I decided to take my usual bridge route to the downtown area. The profusion of flakes falling through the air had a scumbling visual effect on the surfaces of things. The world was made soft, and with the downy presence of the snow, there were no longer any sharp, industrial sounds claiming dominion over the silvery atmosphere.

I had Alex with me and we entered the horizontal span of the bridge, crossing the river heading south. When we reached the midway point, I noticed Alex had stopped. She was gazing down at the water below us. I looked down. The water was getting farther away. I looked across the Amtrak yards to the East, and the buildings were changing in their subtle visual perspectives.

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Without a sound, shudder, or any apparent mechanical movement, we were ascending. The action was smooth, with no creaking, no movement that I could detect, only the water moving continually away, as a massive, silent barge slipped under us. We rose what

seemed to be a hundred feet, straight up. The Bridge Control House looked so small. I saw Charles and Horse 3 leave the small structure and set off up the chalky access road. I wondered if they knew we were high above them.

After a few minutes, as I watched the barge disappear into the whiteness further up river, the bridge began to let us gently down. We moved again, descending to meet the serious swell of the river, through the quiet, soft shades of white. I thought of giant horses, letting loose the best countenance of their weightless cantor, lifting their great backs, then floating us gently down.

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With our fear and uncertainty gone, we made it back to ground level and continued on our way, kicking through the cold powder, our grey shadows seeming to hover over the white prairie floor.

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