



The Bridge

By Joseph Reynolds



My name's Peter but this isn't about me. This is about Mr. Allison and a talk we had one day on a bridge where we fished for perch. It was just coming on evening and, like always in the summer, he'd park his Pontiac in the lot just off the bridge and amble up to my vicinity. Usually he wouldn't say a word at first. He'd bait his lines and drop them over the rusty bridge railing. Then he'd get out a tin of tobacco and fill his briar pipe. After a few satisfactory puffs, he'd regard his lines and look over at me.

"They bitin'?" he'd ask, and then he'd wink.

This day I didn't answer because I had something on my mind. I looked up at him and acknowledged his greeting with a nod.

His shirt and khakis were always starched and pressed. He usually wore a blue work shirt, buttoned at the throat, and a plain tie with a knot so small it seemed like it couldn't have been made from the width of the cloth it came from.

He wore black shoes that reflected like mirrors from the capped toe to the tops, three inches above the ankle. He smiled and said, "Stacey Adams, from Chicago—ol' folks' comforts, sof' as doctors' cotton. A man can't spend too much money on his feet." Right above the sole there was immaculate white stitching. "How," I once asked him, "can you polish the shoe without blackening the stitches?"

"Same way you paint a car without painting the chrome." The explanation satisfied me, but I was sure every piece of his clothing was calculated to express some value or philosophy, and though I worked at it often, I never could quite frame a question clear enough to obtain the truth without seeming impertinent. He had been eyeing me impatiently, and he broke my reverie.

"I said, is they bitin'?" He said it louder this time with a little impatience. I came to learn after a time that men like Mr. Allison are very particular about greetings. It's important that you speak to someone who speaks to you, especially older people.

"No sir, Mr. Allison," I answered and then looked back down at the river. Mr. Allison was tall and gray. He always seemed serious, but his words were light and colorful. He made me call him "Mr. Allison." I asked him once what his first name was and he told me that I had been calling him by

his first name ever since we first met. When I looked up at him, he said his first name was “Mister,” and the subject never came up again.

On this particular day I had been sitting on my bike, fishing and thinking about the house where we lived. I was ashamed of it. It was old and smaller than the houses around it. Pop kept it painted and clean, but you could tell just by looking at it that Pop worked at the mill. Reverend Decker’s house next door was big and proud-looking. It had a bright green lawn and a little round pool with Chinese goldfish.

The corner house was luxurious gray stone. The meanest kid in town lived there. He called our house a “shack.” I was plotting what manner of revenge to take

“A man can’t spend too much money on his shoes!” he said. Every piece of Mr. Allison’s clothing seemed calculated to express some value or philosophy.

on him when I looked up. Mr. Allison had been watching me the whole time.

“What’s bothering you, boy?” he asked. One bushy white eyebrow would rise when he asked a question.

“Nothin’,” I answered. But his jaw clamped on the pipestem and I knew that one of us had to clear the air. Mr. Allison wouldn’t tolerate what he called “heavy air” with his lines in the water. To him, fishing was to be enjoyed and complemented with good conversation.

“Fish is funny. They can sense a storm.”

I could never tell when Mr. Allison was serious because sometimes he’d say the oddest things, and his face was strong and gentle at the same time. He seemed to smile with his eyes, but his leathery brown face was an unchanging mask.

“Mr. Allison—” I started and then I paused, embarrassed.

“That’s me,” he pressed. I could tell he was displeased with this departure from our normal fishing routine.

“Well . . .” I hesitated before blurting it out. “It’s my house.”

He fidgeted with his line, then let the rod rest on the railing. His eyes met mine. “What about your house?”

“It’s old and ugly and kids make fun of it.” I held his gaze.

He checked his line again and restoked his pipe, his face a dark network of unreadable lines.

“Peter,” he began (most of the time he never called me anything but boy), “I’m gonna tell you a story, a true story. I’ll fill in the cracks ’cause I don’t remember how it goes word for word, but the story’s true.” Mr. Allison was full of stories: tales about his youth coming up in the deep South, the troubles of his family, his painful struggle to ease his family’s hunger during the Great Depression. He even did some time once, he told me. I didn’t want to hear a story, but I knew I’d better sit still for this one.

Mr. Allison cleared his throat and spat over the bridge. I looked down at the river. Sometimes the water came down from the mill with woodchips floating on it.

This day it hadn’t rained for some time, and you could see ten feet all the way to the bottom. Mr. Allison cleared his throat again.

“Forty, fifty miles east of here in Philly, they dug tunnels to bring trains in from the suburbs. That was back fifteen years or so, before you was born.”

“Mr. Allison,” I protested, “what have tunnels got to do with—” but he cut me off with a sidelong glance as if I’d just broken wind in church. I didn’t risk another of those interruptions throughout the story.

“Now, when they dig tunnels, it bothers the sewer rats and they surface to find new breeding grounds.”

I frowned but kept my peace.

“Did they teach you about evolution in school? About survival of the fittest?” He went on without waiting for my reply. “It’s a sound principle. City rats evolve the same way any population does—upward. Some big rats came in ship holds from Norway back in the seventeen hundreds. Them that survived the cold and hunger of the trip—and the boots of the sailors that didn’t care to share their ship—settled in the sewers of New York and Philly.”

Mr. Allison wasn’t educated, but he seemed to know everything. Once, when we got rained out, he drove me home. His car was like a library on wheels: there were magazines and books and pamphlets. To make room for me in the passenger seat, he relocated some books, cradling them gently in his huge callused hands as if he were changing a baby.

“Now, back when they dug the tunnels,” he continued, “there was this one particular rat. We’ll call him Sherman.”

He gave me one of those chilling glares out of the corner of his eyes as if anticipating an interruption.

“Sherman was born from a long line of survivors. He was a magnificent rat—long, supple-like, and scarred. His teeth was razor sharp and yellow as the sun.” Mr. Allison leaned his shaggy head back, as if



reflecting.

“He was four at the time of the digging and a day hadn’t passed since his second birthday that he didn’t cripple or kill a rat or cat in a fight over turf. But survival wasn’t Sherman’s only reason for fighting. Critters evolving from hardship come to enjoy violence.

“As the years passed, he got caught up in blood lust and he had a most particular hate for humans. He’d even gnaw on a corpse. Many’s the time he’d gorge himself on a carcass left in an abandoned building or alleyway.”

My eyes must have been as wide as the river. Mr. Allison’s voice gave away his assurance that he finally had a captivated listener.

“Yes sir,” he went on with relish, “Sherman hated humans. He’d skirt around them because of their size and their weapons, but sometimes he’d look at a ‘specially arrogant walk and lust for a chance at a clear shot. But the main reason Sherman didn’t fight humans is because they weren’t after the same things that he was . . .”

Mr. Allison looked out at the light sparkling on the gently moving water and the long shadows we cast as the searing day cooled.

“One night, probably around the Blizzard of ’86, Sherman got stranded outside the basement of the bakery on Locust where he had took up living. He was going from snowdrift to snowdrift when he happened on this substantial box sitting on a steam vent.

“He chews his way into the box, which turns out to be a Maytag washer box. The moist warm air cleared up his head. The box was a comfort indeed on a cold winter night, so what he did is what critters have always done: he declared in his rat soul that it was his.

Our house was old, and smaller than the ones around it. Pop kept it painted and clean, but you could tell just by looking at it that Pop worked at the mill.

“That, as it turns out,” said Mr. Allison, taking several rasping draws on his extinguished pipe, “was bad news for Wilford Jack.”

“Who,” I took my cue, “was Wilford Jack?”

“Don’t matter who he was. He was a street sleeper and he had squeeze his butt into the box that Sherman, the rat, was now calling ‘home.’

“It was tight in that box, but there was enough room for Sherman to sink his fangs into Jack’s hide.

They fought inside that box till the corners wore off and it rolled around the street like a football.” Mr. Allison hesitated.

“Well?” I said.

“Well what?” His voice sounded indignant—as if the story already contained a moral I had failed to grasp.

“What happened?” I prodded.

When I protested, he cut me off with a sidelong glance as if I’d just broken wind in church. I frowned but kept my peace.

“What happened was that Jack pried himself outa that washer box and ran off out into the weather, bleeding and screaming ‘Oh Jesus! Oh Jesus!’” exploded Mr. Allison. “And Sherman stayed right there on his hind legs, hiss’n’ with his back hair up, whippin’ his tail, and showin’ his bloodied yellow teeth—yes sir!”

That signaled the end of the story. Mr. Allison checked his baited line and tapped his pipe on the bridge rail. Without a word we began to pull in our lines and it occurred to me that we fished almost every summer evening. Rarely did we catch anything worth bringing home, but we were never disappointed.

“Mr. Allison,” I asked, “why did you tell me that story?”

“Jus’ so,” he answered.

“Just so?” I asked. ‘Just so’ to Mr. Allison means *for no reason except I felt like it*.

“Yeah—jus’ so.” He looked up at me with a fresh-lit pipe as he packed his gear. “What you don’t see ‘cause you so young is that you supposed to please your customers, not your window-shoppers.”

“What?” Now I was thoroughly confused as I squinted up at him into the late afternoon sun.

Mr. Allison looked down at me and spoke with a voice that seemed to flow through soft cloth. “A house ain’t who you are. It ain’t even *what* you are. It’s a place to come from and be somebody. Times was tough when I was coming up, but you know what I learn every day of my life?”

“What’s that, Mr. Allison?”

“I learn that it’s true what the poet Hughes wrote. *Life ain’t no crystal staircase. It’s got rough spots and patches of carpet torn away*. And you know what else I learn? If you see yourself as others see you, you ain’t never



goin' to see yourself."

"I understand," I lied, "but what's that got to do with the story?"

"That wasn't no story," Mr. Allison growled. "That was true, and what it's got to do with is this: *What counts is not the size of the house, but the size of the mouse!*"

That winter Pop got sick and died from lung disease. In the spring, me and Mom moved to Denver to stay with Pop's sister Cassie, and I finished school there.

Last fall I went back to the cemetery to pull weeds off Pop's grave and I had to cross the bridge on my way there. All the rust has been scraped off and they'd painted it gray. The road across the bridge is paved now, and the path along the shoulder is a sidewalk with neat little squares. I figured one day to come and drop a few lines from it but thought better of it. The way the bridge is now—all shiny and proud—doesn't look like it could be fished from.

I had the cemetery put up a fit headstone for Pop, and when I went down the hill to the caretaker's cottage to settle up, I saw a new grave way in the back where the county buries its poor. The mound was crusty from the recent drought. There was no headstone, just a marker about the size of a brick. That's when I learned Mr. Allison's first name:

1918-1988

MOSES SHERMAN ALLISON

I went and got half the flowers I brought for Pop and put them alongside Mr. Allison's marker. When I passed the caretaker's stones on my way out I looked them over for a larger marker for Mr. Allison. There were angels with trumpets, fluted scrolls, and big blocks of polished gray marble the color of the sky before a bad rain. The caretaker saw me looking and came out of his cottage. He looked down at his blocks and then up at me to see where I was looking.

"I can let you have that angel for half price," he offered. His hands were jammed in his pockets and he rocked back and forth on his heels.

"Too big," I answered without considering it.

"That little marble one on the end is cut nice. Put it deep enough and you can't tell how big it is."

"Too wide," I said. "They're all just too big."

"I never heard a deceased complain about the size of his tombstone," the caretaker said lightly with a weak grin. "Who's it for?"

"Mr. Allison," I answered, "the grave in the back."

"Oh!" he spoke, as if he suddenly understood. "The old black fella—I got some cheaper stones around back."

The caretaker started to the rear, beckoning to me

to follow.

"It's not about money," I said, feeling offended and strangely confused.

"Well," the caretaker's voice came in muffled exasperation. "If it ain't about size, and it ain't about money—then what's it about?"

I sniffed the air and smelled freshly dug earth and smoke from the logs burning in the caretaker's cabin. "It's about mice," I said over my shoulder as I started for home. "It's about mice." ★

Behind the Closed Door

The woman in the wallpaper chair
Taps my skull with a dainty mallet
of bland questions,
Mining for the nerve that will jerk
My brain into spasms of explanation
For why I can't think of anything except
The blinding white suns rising from my fingernails.

She trails a glossed fingernail over her lips,
Prying thoughts from my mind,
Coaxing them to form in my mouth
And evaporate into the latticework of her mind.

She babbles and her pen flits,
A magic wand trailing fractured rainbows.
I close my eyes, but my wish is not granted,
And I open them to see the pen's black tip
Pointed at me.

I speak and she tilts,
Waiting like a ripe bullfrog
To ingest the fly that buzzes
From my refuse pile.

Her eyebrows ravel into tight spools.
"What do you think that means?"
The wooden floor is unyielding.
She records the pause on her notepad.

I imagine my brain seeping out
The back of my head and following
The floorboards to her fuchsia lap.
There she could sort the fleshy fragments
on a silver tray,
Mutter an "Ah-ha!" and return to me my mind—
Glittering china plates,
Neatly arranged.

—Kelly O'Brien,
Eleventh grade, Bothell High School,
Bothell, Washington

