

Small County Bridges · Robert C. Grunst

*Cursed be he who moves his
neighbor's landmarks!*

Deuteronomy

THE JOKING HAS GIVEN OUT. We have been waiting ten hours for this truck to show up, and now, the diesel's idle rattling and the driver's scuffling—he is fighting with a padlock and bad light—provide little relief. With all his weight, which is about the same as mine, not much, the driver jars up and back on the steel latch of the trailer's back doors. He will not be much help I am thinking. No one says a word. A frost seal pops. The rubber lips of the doors rip apart. The ice fog pours out, and frozen solid fish with big, black, glazed eyes count themselves out of a split box. They plumb as far as the dirt at our feet.

“Shit,” the driver says. “Look at how they loaded these things. I got a lot of weight here, and they don't care how they load it. They just pile boxes on, and everything on the bottom takes the crush. Looks like you'll have to load what you've got through the doors on the side.

“Walleyes,” Riel is saying.

“Saugers is what they have on the tickets,” the driver's partner says.

“They're pickerel,” the driver says. “Lake Erie fish. We're on the back kick from Wheatley. Small truck was supposed to be here broke down. They called us while we were still loading down there and told us to come this way. Take what you've got. The small truck broke down. It was probably the clutch.”

“The clutch has never been good in that one,” the driver's partner says.

“Most of what we've got on board though is smelt. We're pretty heavy just with the smelt. Over the scales. How much you have to put on?”

The fish on the ground appear to be so brittle that they would shatter if you hit them right on line with the dorsal fins. It is 3:05 A.M. and anything but warm, and the fish on the ground are smoking. Albert is looking at the fish. “Not much good, these Lake Erie things,” he says. “We could load this trailer up with walleyes that would make these things here

look like those dummies people keep in aquariums. We'd have to get two and a quarter a pound for the walleyes I'm talking about. Driver, you think your boss could pay that?" Albert starts picking up fish and underhanding them back into the trailer. The fish fly over the wreckage of boxes.

"Those are dirty fish," Albert says. "You better close this back up. You don't want us working around that mess you picked up in Wheatley to make space for all we've got, do you. You can show us your other doors in awhile. Close it up and come inside. You two need a little time to wake up and talk."

Albert has one of those Joe DiMaggio coffeemakers, and he is getting it ready to go—two scoops of coffee and the full charge of water. "Now, what you mean 'you'll take what we've got?'" The driver does not hear Albert's question. Or he does not want to acknowledge it. The driver's partner who is probably not long out of high school starts in about the same time the coffeemaker begins spitting. We are all very tired. He starts in with this amazement about the Mackinac Bridge. Albert takes his place in his chair and picks up the control to rotate his satellite dish, the one the trailer almost clipped making the bend between it, a pine, the cabin and the frame building enclosing the fish market and the freezer-cooler.

"Let me see what I can bring down here," Albert says. "We just got that dish set up. I'm glad you're greased good enough to have missed it. You know we couldn't get nothing up here otherwise but squalls. Now, you can't tell what you might have drop in. If there's life on other planets, what kind of friends you think these satellites might be making us, driver? What's your name? They'll be pirating the dirty movies."

The driver provides a first name and a condescending grin. "I've never thought about it," he says, "but it's worth thinking about."

"How would he do that?" Albert says as if to himself. "School teacher, what do you think?"

"They wouldn't learn what they really need to know."

"Did you hear that?" Albert says. "I think he really is a school teacher. He knows the right answer. Did you hear that, truck driver?"

The young one is going on about the Mackinac Bridge. He had thought the bridge between the Sault Ste. Maries or the one between Port Huron

and Sarnia were big ones, but the Mackinac Bridge scared him a little. The truck kept going and going and they got to the midway span that doesn't have anything underneath holding it up and a ship off in the Straits didn't look any bigger than the truck. He had seen ships like that in Duluth, up real close, and if the ship looked like that, then how big did the truck he was in look from the ship? That, he is saying, is what got him shaking just a little, that and the buzzing the tires made, and he started wondering if they had bathrooms on the other side.

He is saying he is glad they came that way instead of going back over the top of Georgian Bay, the way they had come, because he had never known there was a bridge like that and you have to see it to believe it. He had never known about the other ones either. He thought he could feel the Mackinac Bridge moving when they went over it too. The other ones didn't move.

Riel is saying the Mackinac Bridge does move. Sometimes the wind gets blowing up there hard enough, they have to close it down. And if it's not in a snowstorm, you can see the middle span swinging. It's supposed to swing.

That's right, Raymond is saying. A lot of guys got killed building that bridge. There's a plaque up there with their names on it.

It was all right going over in the tractor. Really, the young one is saying, but I'm not so sure I'd care to go over it in my Camaro.

"What's that?" Albert asks. "You think that bridge might fall in with you? Why would it pick you out and not anybody else? Must be a pretty good speedster you have in that Cameo. That it?"

"Camaro," the young one says.

"Your partner, here," Albert says, "why doesn't he tell us anything, I wonder? Truck driver, tell me, what's the price of fish tonight."

The coffeemaker is sputtering, and everyone is waiting for the driver to say something right. There are close to six thousand pounds of fish in Albert's cooler: Riel's fish, Raymond's and Arnie's, some of Tobinsen's and some of La Rue's, some of Godwin's and some of Laski's. The driver starts going over the prices which everyone already knows and everyone wants to hear confirmed again by this man, a man of medium height in his thirties who is the experienced one. He is good at using a lot of words that sound like something and say nothing . . .

Albert calls me school teacher because he has an idea about what that means, and it probably makes more sense to him than anything else he's heard about me. I show up for four to six weeks in May and June and work with his sons, Arnie and Raymond, and people who don't know, don't know what to think when he says, "This is the school teacher." What he calls me I don't look like—coveralls, hat, and boots washed in fish water and stippled with mud from nets—and Albert likes to be in position to set up and then to stand back and wait for the double takes. It's good, once in a while at least, to be in the middle and to know what's passing and why and how from start to finish it is going to happen.

One of the reasons I come up to work on the Lake is because I don't know what is going to happen, and I like it. Tonight though, Albert and nobody else—except the driver perhaps—would care for my preference which, I would explain, does not extend to transactions like the one taking place.

I've never been asked to explain though, and I'm grateful for the trust. Arnie asked if I'd help load a truck. Since he sliced his left thumb while filleting fish in the morning, he won't be bulling around boxes. With promises of high prices and dispatch of a truck to cast the prices in doubt, we have been waiting at Albert's and leaving and then checking back off and on since three in the afternoon—but hour after hour nothing. In the pole building with La Rue and Godwin, Tobinsen has spent hours getting tighter and tighter and trying to keep back the swelling disbelief with his bizarre non sequiturs.

The rattling plastic hatch, the sputtering, the metallic aroma, (Somedays you'll try almost anything to keep yourself connected.), the coffeemaker makes a spectacle filling itself, but Albert will not be distracted. Albert is the keeper of fish-selling stories, and few of the stories allow for credit on trust. "Maybe everybody is jittery enough," Albert says. Albert is trying everything. The young one, still amazed by the middle span of the Mackinac Bridge, asks for cream. Albert comes up with a can of evaporated milk, the brand with the cow's head on the label. He asks for sugar. Albert says he has no sugar in the place. Maybe out in the market . . . Wait, though, he is saying, and he pulls a yellow honey bear out of a cupboard. He holds it up and passes it over, recommending that honey is better than sugar anyway. The young one squeezes the bear, a crystalized bung farts

out, and honey slithers into his cup. Right along, now, the driver is giving answers, and every answer is perfect.

The fish will be double-checked for weight as soon as he gets the load into the plant. His boss will take as many fish as Albert can get together. The truck will come through again, next week, any time, as soon as there's another load to pick up. The scale at the plant is true. Other fishermen have been real satisfied. Never complain. He is saying how the fish slime wrecks his shoes. His smile is like an habitual adverb. "What do you wear?" Albert asks. "Red Wings?"

The driver goes right on saying that his boss has worked out a big contract to send fish to Japan. The Japanese will take thousands and thousands of pounds, maybe even suckers, and the price is going to hold, at least always a quarter higher than whatever the local buyer might offer.

"We've heard stories like this before," Albert says. "Say. You know, sellers . . . You hear them calling suckers mullets these days. *Mullets*. That sound better, you think?"

It is 3:30 and where Albert stopped on the satellite is some kind of murder I have never witnessed before. Raymond watches when he can't stand to listen to what the driver is saying, and I ask Raymond what it is. It is Korean or Thai kick boxing, and the small men on the screen stand apart, and then they come together so fast I cannot tell what is happening—except it is serious and potentially lethal. What they do with their hands is not so bad.

They do not seem to care much for striking that way, but with their feet they are fast and even graceful, and they appear to be deadly. Whether they are deadly or not, the important idea seems to build on the persuasion that the kicks can kill. The appeal is for viewers who will respond to the unreal physicality of the contests, the intoxicating relationship between weight and thrust between bodies and nothing at all.

Christ! That little one is mean! Arnie is saying. Look at him!

The little one rocks back on the beam of his right leg, coils his left and it springs out like a blade—a kick that connects with the side of his opponent's head. The man is hurt. While the referee is trying to get in between them and stop it, the other fighter coils and kicks again.

"How would it be, do you think, to make a living like that, truck driver?" Albert asks. "I've been fishing all my life, trucks and windsleds

out on the ice, open boats, lifting my nets by hand. Twenty-two, twenty-six fathoms. A man got killed once when a propellor came off a sled. Cut him in two. That will hurt you. Know nothing it counts for. But fish built what you see here.

“Those kick-fighters are no crazier than lots of crazy bow-and-arrows you could see right around here if you wanted to look. You know what I mean?” Albert is telling the driver something. The driver is saying we should load the fish so he can get going up the road before it gets too late.

The weigh-up room has a concrete floor. The floor dishes, and the dish is full of bloody ice. A drain runs out into the gully. We are packing fish in treated cardboard cartons with plastic bag liners: 80# to the carton, plus 2# for shrinkage. It is hard work. Jumbo, number one and medium white-fish; ciscoette trout and lean trout; all the fish are coming out of Albert’s cooler. The driver’s partner is standing next to the scales. He is impressed by the big ciscoettes, fish large enough to astonish him, one pig close to twenty-five pounds, and when he asks where they come from nobody answers. The driver is saying he doesn’t know if his boss can handle such big fish. When he sees the looks—Riel, Laski—he reconsiders. There aren’t many of them, are there, he is saying . . . He points to tell his partner to help him lift a box. Arnie is keeping the tallies, anchoring a pad with his bad hand—the thumb wrapped in fraying gauze and tape.

The compressor for the refrigeration unit on the trailer stutters and crackles. So does the tractor’s diesel. Riel is trying to keep count of his fish, but he keeps losing count. He is so nervous he does not want to pick up the boxes that belong to him. He is afraid, maybe, he will drop them, or maybe he does not want to feel in himself again how much he might be losing.

It is cold with the cooler door standing open. Ice and black knots of blood slick the floor. Men are dragging carriers full of fish out of the cooler—shoving, pulling with hooks. They are taking weighed-up cartons out to the trailer.

Watching the balance, I slap fish into cartons until they are near weight—head and tail, head and tail—all the bellies open, the guts long gone into birds. I try different fish then to find a last one or two which will ease the scale’s arm off the bar for each box. There are trout I can identify, singular ones which presented especially difficult puzzles with respect to

getting them out when, sewn-in-and-snarled-up in Arnie's deep, mono-filament gillnets, they first came across the lifting table and into my hands. Carriers full of fish surround the scale. Cold in the light and something more than ample, the fish in Albert's weigh-up room, the patterned, leathery sides of the great trout, the humpbacks of the jumbo whitefish, make immediate claim to reality. Before they are landed, though, they are nothing short of apparitions. They are extravagant hopes.

Frost steam is rolling out of the open side of the trailer. The one with the infatuation for the big bridge is in with the load from Wheatley. Trying to create room for the last boxes of fish, he is kicking cartons with no effect whatsoever and no grace. If you try to take an 82# box yourself, unless you are big or almost impossibly precise by skill that somehow precedes experience, your insides might rip. Things might fall through. We are trying to be careful with respect to the weight. A man to each end, we swing the boxes, bridging the difference to the open edge of the trailer. We push them inside.

Three amber lights glow in a row across the top of the trailer. The driver and his partner are working to secure the load before locking down the doors. 4700#s of fish have been removed from the cooler. The skunks that otherwise steal Albert's chickens must be at their scullery where the drain spews out into the gully. Those dummies . . . (Albert was educating me once about skunks.) Those dummies tried for my rooster last time, school teacher. I fired my flashlight at 'em, and I winged one like that. I emptied my pistol, five shots, and I missed them five times . . . Then a big one turns around and pisses on that light and I had to hire a kid to bury it.

Albert, inside the cabin, is saying it is too hot, and he is walking around in his union suit and getting the numbers from Arnie. "They about ready to go out there?"

"School teacher . . . You couldn't have let them have too much extra weight on our boxes? You don't ever have to worry about taking care of them. Buyers always find some way to cull a couple hundred pounds of good fish on a load like we put in that trailer."

Albert is reciting the canon: fishermen, rubber checks they receive for their fish. It is a way of life where distances between fishermen and fish and markets and buyers are drawn out by flimsier and flimsier mechanics: attri-

tion rates on tires, odometer reading, shrinkage on fish, breakdowns in other states, El Niño, culinary enthusiasms in Japan, the disposition of a buyer's accounts, and sometimes nothing—no money, no word. Albert is explaining how this man whose name appears nowhere on the tractor or trailer outside is even older than he is and how this buyer has taken different fishermen and how names of businesses change but the names behind them are always the same and you cannot tell when the changes will happen. The buyers always reappear and come to you for your fish—take this time—and how can you tell? You have to pit buyers off against one another because if you give in, sell to only one buyer, you will be left washed and pressed as good as Davieaux's pigs.

When he comes in (Close that door good, Albert is saying, it's cold in here.), the driver looks for Arnie. He asks Arnie how many fish? He is drawing one of those back pocket wallets on a chain. Next time you should take the heads off those big ones, he is saying. They look pretty fat inside too. You need to scrape out that fat. He thumbs off company checks.

Taking names and calculating by figures Arnie provides, the driver fills in amounts that correspond to weights. "Laski? Spell that for me," he says.

"French name," Albert says: "*L a s k i* . . . And my last name, driver, it's Swedish, not Norwegian. You can see that? Can't you, driver?" Albert's last name is Swedish, though by appearance, it is the Chippewa in Albert which is easiest to see. The driver, however, seems not to have followed the idea through to the point.

Riel is looking over his check and asking how long the market for ciscoettes will hold out. If there's any difference on these when we weigh-up again at the plant, the driver is saying, we'll credit your accounts.

"Or the other way," Albert says. "School teacher. You keep coming around nights like this, one of these years you'll be so smart I'll hire you an honest job. You could stand guard on my chickens. You know how to tell the difference between a block of firewood, a blockhead, and a thief?"

Laski, Albert is saying now, see if you can check down the burner in that heater. It's hot in here and somebody smells like fish.

The driver's second is sitting on top of the compressor unit, legs dangling over the space between the tractor and trailer. In a few hours, after much repetition he has learned to turn the third syllable of *Mackinac* not with the *knack* he arrived with but with the familiar *gnaw*. The driver is calling out that his situation is wrong. He cannot back up. He will have to take the loop around the backsides of the pole building and the cabin. Laski is trying to get Albert's chain saw running. Low branches will have to come out of one of Albert's maples. When it starts, the saw rattles like a case full of empty bottles and loose caps. Albert is calling to the driver not to get too close to his dish, and the driver, in turn, is asking about the back road. Going the back way he will save some miles and avoid the weigh station on the main route.

Albert is saying there are some mean curves and some wild Indians along the way, and the blacktop in places is heaved up and broken. The shoulders are swamps. The driver eases forward in one of the low gears. He creeps. All of the weight creeps behind, pressing down, making hard cake of the dirt. The trailer is drooling strings of juice. The metal caps on the exhaust pipes clip and clap. The second is lifting up wires. Telephone there, Albert is saying, nothing there to take off your scalp.

We walk the truck around the loop while Laski buzzes down limbs, and Raymond clears the way, and the sun is rising. The driver is worrying now about the bank he came up on. It is all sand, the drive on top, drainage below, between the drive and the asphalt. He just fits between the two maples, just clears the heavy branches above while his second on top of the compressor is eating leaves.

Someone is going to take a beating, Raymond is saying. Someone is going to take a beating.

Beneath the tires the dirt pops. The second is lifting another wire with, as far as I can see, no thought about it. I have a great fear of wires. I know only one thing about electricity. You're just like a Cherokee up there, Albert is calling, one of those guys who dances on beams.

The driver is asking about bridges. I have taken the back way (Once with Arnie's new Buick, and in the middle of the afternoon, when you're not supposed to have to be watching, I almost slammed into a string of five deer.) and I can't remember how many bridges. There are rivers, many streams, many small flows some people call creeks. There are old steel spans and many wooden ones, some with shot-peppered signs declar-

ing load limits. I think one of those bridges is pretty new, Albert is saying. But there's some bad ones. Truck driver? How much do you weigh?

The driver makes his turn down the incline to the road. Then he turns toward town: the wrong way. No one has time, though, to get started screaming because the trailer begins to roll back, the driver shifting to take a good angle by which to get his whole rig onto the crown to the west, the way he had said he would take. Everyone is watching the truck climb onto the road. Nobody is talking.

The driver lets go two signals on his horn—like a pathetic, faraway goose. The driver's second, having accomplished the small leap from the compressor to the top of the tractor cab (Very adroitly. Maybe we are all surprised.) follows up with a sequence of moves requiring a mirror bracket, some purchase we cannot see, and no small defiance of gravity. He swings down on his side of the cab, shoots through the window, and drops out of sight. The big diesel is starting to soar down the line toward the tribal center, the baseball field, and the camp, and I'm not the only one, I'm guessing, waiting to hear something from Albert.