EDWARD CLONEY

BRIDGE

1. SUMMER 1791–SUMMER 1966

The town is divided by a river that flows through it. There is a north side and a south side. Two hundred and twenty-five years ago, on a summer's day, the first settler, with his wife and two young sons from Yorkshire, England, came up the river from the ocean they had just crossed. They stopped after twelve miles when there was no longer any tidal movement. The settler saw the ending of the tide as a symbolic ending of their long, rough journey and as a calm place of beginning. "Journey's End" he named the place, and on the north side of the river he cleared a plot of land and built a house.

He chose the north side because along the river on the south side there was a low lying meadow that might prove to be flood prone during spring run-off. This is, in fact, the case—the meadow floods every spring. But there is an irony in that the empty meadow serves as a basin that collects all the floodwater and keeps it from penetrating into the slightly higher south side areas—whereas during especially severe flood years (on average every 20 years or so) the entire north side, with no collection basin, is inundated with water. You are better off, in the long run, living south side. But do not tell that to north side citizens of today—most would not agree. There exists a persistent prejudice in the town: north side is better (despite periodic flooding). Bluntly (but rightly) put: most north side people think they are better than south side people.

And it began with the first settler. Because when he gave the calm place on the river its English name, the place already had a name. A native name. And the native language spoke of Nature's sounds, which is what they knew best. In this case, they called the river "Filip." It was the sound the river made, a comforting sound from the constant lapping of tiny, barely-tidal wavelets as they flipped ashore: *filip-filip*. The settler was aware of their name for the place because he dealt with them, and came to know some of their language. He traded with them (things of metal for things of protein,

till he learned how to hunt himself). However, he preferred his own name for the place and did not consider that it might suggest ownership.

For centuries the Mi'kmaq people routinely came and fished the abundant gaspereau, trout, salmon and eel. And they had the good sense to build their seasonal homes on the south side of the river—on a low ridge above the flood prone meadow. Moccasin Ridge it was named—by more white pioneers who soon settled. Also, in time, a new name was chosen for the settlement—replacing the awkward Journey's End. Instead: River Philip. But the name is meaningless—the beauty of the original name—the lovely *Filip* was replaced by a non-existent Mr. Philip.

River Philip grew to be a prosperous town of about a thousand souls. Thriving on the vast, untouched forests of the river valley, lumbering and saw-milling was the main industry, the river providing abundant power. On the north side of town grand houses were built. Steepled churches were erected; a town hall, two schools, commercial businesses: a bank, a theater, a pharmacy, hotels, doctors' and lawyers' offices—all the things a thousand people needed. And all on the north side (and all flooded every twenty years, but no mind).

Later still, when logs were scarce and there was no suitable space left north side, new industries arose on the south: a furniture factory, a foundry, a woolen mill, a grist mill and a creamery. Also, new homes to house the workers of the new enterprises—much more modest homes than the grand ones north side, not slums, but far from grand. And all this was built on the abandoned ridge above the low meadow. In just a few short years Moccasin Ridge had seen its last moccasin.

2. SUMMER 1966

A pivotal year for the town of River Philip. Two things happened. First, construction of the new Trans-Canada Highway reached the town or, rather, was in the process of bypassing it altogether. Up until then most interprovincial traffic passed through the town and made a major contribution to the local economy. With the arrival of the new highway all that business would be lost, and the town, it was feared, was headed for a significant decline. A falling. And the second thing that happened that summer was just that—a falling.

"Well, if anyone could bring her down, he'd be the one." That was the response (or something like it) of people who hadn't been there at the

bridge when it fell. Denny Carter brought her down alright. A bridge that had stood for close to a century—silent, solid, always there. Is there anything more taken for granted than a bridge? And downed in less than a minute. But yes, leave it to Denny Carter.

Denny Carter was from the south side of town and the word "brute" best describes him. But it wasn't so much his brutishness that brought down the bridge; it was the brute machine that he drove. Denny got on with the construction company building the sub-base of the new highway. He operated a piece of heavy equipment called a "carry-all" that transferred immense loads of earth scraped up by bulldozers. It was the biggest piece of machinery and the two were well-suited, it and Denny: rough, aggressive transformers of all they came near. On Thursday, July 29, Denny forgot to take his lunch-can to work with him. At noon he decided to drive to his home on the south side to get it. On his carry-all.

He tore through town as if he was on nothing more than a bicycle. The thing banged and bounced on its huge tires and as he rounded the comer of Main and Water Streets some recalled hearing him yelping—as he too bounced about on his seat—his balloon face beaming.

Halfway across the bridge he slowed and shifted gears. There was a loud, grinding noise, the bridge juddered and swayed and slowly dropped off its north and then its south abutments. Crashed into the shallow river below. Denny and his carry-all went down with it. As did a black car that had just entered the bridge behind him.

But no one was seriously hurt. Incredible! People were not surprised to learn that Denny had escaped unscathed. The fact that he had jumped clear was almost expected of him, such was his nature. (It gave him a good jolt though, and his simple grin was soon gone.) So that was that, but it was the black car that was the miracle. The roof was crushed and its body encased within the twisted steel girders, yet the people inside—a man and his young son from out of province—both climbed out of the wreckage and up the north embankment, with only slight cuts and bruises. After a brief visit to the doctor, they returned to the scene lightly bandaged, still in shock, no doubt. A few hours later relatives arrived to rescue them and the town never heard tell of them again. And Denny? He walked home to his lunch unperturbed and, true to his nature, returned to spend the early afternoon revving and wrestling his machine up out of the river. He was back with it on the jobsite before his shift was over. As for the town, an earthquake could not have caused

more consternation. But no one was hurt and a new bridge could be built. Overdue, obviously, anyway. And that should have been the end of it. But it wasn't. And what happened next was directly due to the town's ancient and persistent river-dividing prejudice.

People gathered at both sides of the river; latecomers got the details of what had happened. They looked in disbelief at the fallen bridge, the wrecked car, Denny hard at it, the town's public works supervisor taking charge. The supervisor had called the Provincial Department of Highways regional office and reported what had happened—the Department actually owning the bridge, it being a part of the provincial highway system. His instructions from them were simple and obvious: detour all traffic away from the site. This he did. On the north side he had his crew erect a barrier and a detour sign at the intersection of Main and Water Streets. It directed all east-bound traffic down the twelve miles of the riverside highway to the closest bridge—at Port Philip—from where it could continue east. (Port Philip was an even more meaningless name because there the sound of water lapping ashore is much more than a *filip-filip*—more of a *Slap! Slap!* Port Slap?)

Pardon the digression. As for the south side, the works supervisor had, of course, no access there. So he called Stumpy Gillis into action. Stumpy Gillis was a south side resident and a casual summer employee with the works department, his main job being to scythe grass along the streets without sidewalks—plenty of those south side. Now he was instructed to park his pickup truck at the south end of Water Street, block traffic access to the fallen bridge and detour it down the south side river highway to Port Philip, from where it could continue west. And this is what Stumpy did. It would have been like pinning a badge on him (if you knew Stumpy), so much authority all of a sudden. When he got the call he piled into his old truck and raced to where the traffic was to be rerouted. He screeched to a halt, got out, and yanked the tailgate down. He sat on the tailgate—a troll protecting his damaged bridge, short legs swinging as he awaited his first detourees.

Meanwhile on the north side things were under control. The detour was working smoothly and a second barrier was erected in front of the empty north side abutment. The workday was ending. The Highway Office called to say that a crew and equipment would be there at first light to remove the wreckage and begin construction of a temporary army-style Bailey Bridge. When the five o'clock whistle blew at the foundry the managers and fore-

men returned to their north side homes, in shifts, in a rowboat that had been knocked together at the furniture factory. Climbing up the north side bank, one of the managers, noting the barrier, asked his fellow rowers: "Shouldn't there be a barrier south side?"

"They'll do it in the morning, likely," someone said. "No one will get through Stumpy.

But someone did. As the evening wore on Stumpy had only a trickle of vehicles to detour. And as darkness approached there was no traffic at all. He lit the two warning lanterns that the works supervisor had rowed over to him, placing one on each end of the detour sign that had also been sent—his truck and the big lit sign blocking the entrance to Water Street. Stumpy grew grumpy: where the hell was Ruby with his night snack? She'd said she'd be down with it before dark. He felt it would be safe enough to leave for the few minutes it would take him to walk home. But he quickly dismissed the thought—duty called. "Damn woman," he cursed.

Not much later she arrived. "Why so goddamned late?" he demanded.

"Now Arthur," said Ruby. "Just look, I've made you a nice date loaf." She sat his can, with the loaf and sandwiches, the thermos of hot tea, on the tailgate beside him. "Are you gonna sit here all night?"

"Of course, woman. I'm on duty."

"You'll fall asleep, Arthur," she said.

"Won't be no traffic anyway," he said.

But there was.

The town didn't even know when it had happened, sometime in the night obviously. The car was there in the morning—there in the downed bridge wreckage. M. and Mme. Henri Sonier, a young couple from Montreal returning home from a honeymoon holiday. Both dead, and not on impact.

Why them? is, of course, the question. Why not Denny Carter? Why not the black car people? Surely they were more eligible (if that's the right word) for death. A cruel irony, that when the bridge went down there could have been three people killed. The fall was going to happen—that was the case the second Denny entered the bridge. The black car people were just unfortunate enough to be right behind him. That's all that was. But everyone survived—no one even much hurt. What a miracle! And how senseless that someone had to die after the fact. Common sense, a foolproof barricade—both absent in the town of River Philip, July 29th/30th, summer 1966.

Who was to blame? This was determined by a coroner's inquest held two months later.

Denny Carter? No. Both he and his employer were easily absolved when it was revealed that the maximum load permitted on the bridge exceeded that of the weight of Denny's machine. Stumpy Gillis? No. Evidence showed it was possible for the Soniers to have simply ignored the detour and driven around it to their doom. Why would they do that? No way of knowing. But it was obvious that that's what they did—and just as apparent that Stumpy had dozed off and was therefore unable to stop them from doing so.

Question to Arthur Gillis: Did you at any time in the night fall asleep?

Answer from Arthur Gillis: Must've.

But Arthur Gillis's dozing off, it was concluded, did not cause the tragedy. Had he not dozed, in all likelihood he could have prevented it, but he did not cause it. The lack of a proper barrier at the bridge-collapse site caused it. Who then? The town works supervisor? No. Nor the town either. Barricading the approaches to the bridge was the responsibility of the Provincial Highways Department, which they did not do.

Question to town works supervisor: *Why did you erect two north side barriers and no south side barriers?*

Answer: *Too busy on the north; no access to the south side.*

Question: *Why did you not access the south side, with barriers via Port Philip?*

Answer: *No time.*

Question: *No time for the south side?*

Answer: *Correct.*

Question: *Was the Provincial Highways Department satisfied with what you reported you had done on the south side—employ Mr. Gillis?*

Answer: *Yes.*

Question: *On July 29, 1966, did anyone from the Highways Department visit the site?*

Answer: *No. I was told they would be there first thing in the morning.*

Who was to blame? No one. An entity was to blame, it was judged: the Provincial Highways Department, legal owners of the bridge. The Sonier family was paid an undisclosed out-of-court settlement and were never heard from again. One would think though, that the Sonier family could put a name to it: River Philip, the meaninglessly-named town, the town with no bridge.

3. SUMMER 2016

And what has evolved since, in a half century? Nothing good. One after the other all the industries closed and weren't replaced. Grand homes went unsold and declined. Businesses closed. And then a final blow was dealt. Go down some summer evening to the river and you'll be hard pressed to hear any filip-filip these days (or even Slap! Slap!, if that were the case). Because the twinning of the Trans-Canada Highway has recently been completed. From it is an incessant, 24-hour, non-stop roar—a wailing, whining cry proclaiming that if destinations are not timely met, the world could end. A roar so loud and fierce the fish are terrified to swim further upriver than tide's end. The river is dying; the town is dying. Northsiders and southsiders alike have decamped—as the Mi'kmaq did long ago, and who would have known the roar for what it is—a curse at last fulfilled.

And Stumpy Gillis is dying, too. Ninety-one and lying in a bed he will only leave one final time. Summer has at last arrived, after a cold, late spring, and it will be Stumpy's last. One evening as night approaches he calls out for Ruby and she goes to his side.

"Ruby," he says. "it was the wind."

"What?" Ruby asks.

"The wind," he repeats.

"What wind?"

"The time the bridge fell—it was the wind."

"What in the world are you talking about, Arthur?"

"It was the wind that killed them Frenchies, Ruby. A wind must've come up off the river and blew over the detour sign. I had to put it back up come daybreak. They must've driven over it and saw the lanterns—the wind didn't blow them out—and figured it was just a warning of a bad patch of road ahead. I told nobody."

"Oh Arthur!" Ruby cries.

"I'm probably cursed to hell, Ruby."

"Whole town's cursed, I'd say."

"Close the window, Ruby. I can't stand the howl."