

Water Under the Bridge

By Susan Page Davis

“Let’s go to the bridge,” Michael said.

“My dad would kill me,” Billy replied. He floated lazily in an inner tube on the glassy surface of Pleasant Pond between his friends Michael and Larry. The three boys had been swimming for an hour, and Michael was bored, but Billy savored the bright sun, the warm water, and the feeling that this was the best possible place on earth.

It was near the end of August. Vacationers were closing their cottages and heading back to town. Another week and the boys would be back in school. Billy didn’t want to think about that.

Larry flicked a few drops of water at Billy and used his Donald Duck voice to confide, “Come on. What parents don’t know won’t hurt them.”

“Your parents aren’t cops.” Billy made a face at him. “Dad’s afraid we’ll get hurt.”

Michael laughed. “It’s not like we’re jumping off the bridge. Let’s go.”

He and Larry splashed toward shore, and Billy reluctantly followed. They ran barefoot along the grassy path to the bridge, where the road crossed a neck of the pond.

“Come on!” Larry careened down the bank and plunged into the water with Michael right behind him.

Billy waded in cautiously. Larry was surface diving in the narrow channel, and Michael was treading water beneath the bridge.

Larry surfaced and shoved his dripping hair from his eyes. “There’s a lot of junk on the bottom.”

“Old cans and what else?” Billy asked.

Larry sucked in a deep breath and dove again. He came up sputtering, “Hey, there’s a cave or something down there.”

“Yeah, right,” Michael said scornfully.

“No, it’s for real. Did you see the pile of gravel on the bottom next to the concrete? There’s a hole there that it came out of. I can look up into it.”

“Cool! Show me.”

“Guys,” Billy said nervously. His friends disappeared beneath the surface. He saw them glide toward the abutment. Suddenly they were gone, and it was very still beneath the bridge.

“Mike? Larry?” Billy called. Michael could hold his breath a long time, but this was way too long. Across his mind flashed the image of his father warning sternly, “*You boys better be careful.*”

“Howdy, pardner,” said a loud John Wayne voice.

Billy knew it was Larry. He could imitate anyone.

“Where are you?”

A laugh echoed off the bridge pilings. A few seconds later Larry popped up beside him. “Come on, I’ll show you.”

Billy paddled along behind him toward the piling.

“Take a big breath,” Larry said and ducked beneath the surface.

Billy gulped and followed. He saw Larry’s pale legs disappear into a hole under the concrete. His heart thumping, he followed and bobbed almost immediately to the surface.

“Where are we?”

Michael was sitting on a concrete shelf at the bottom of the pier wall. “Inside the bridge support. Cool, huh?” Their voices had a weird, hollow echo.

A car rumbled over the deck above.

“We shouldn’t be in here,” Billy insisted. “Dad will freak!”

“Only if you tell him,” Michael said.

“No, really.” Billy tried not to sound panicky. “Some hunting camps down the lake have been broken into. They’ve been trying to solve the case for weeks, and they don’t have any solid evidence. Dad’s really upset about it. I don’t want to do anything to make him mad right now.”

“What, someone’s just breaking into cottages?” Michael asked.

“And stealing stuff. Fishing tackle, electronics, guns—anything that’s not nailed down, Dad said.”

Michael shook his head in disgust. “People should know better than to leave that stuff in their cottages. Must be out-of-staters.”

“Shh,” Larry hissed. “There’s a boat coming.”

Michael peered through a slit between two concrete slabs. “I see it.”

“Let me see!” Billy took his post.

A small motorboat putt-putted toward the bridge. A man and woman rode in the boat, with fishing rods resting on the seats beside them. The boys were just above water level, five yards from where the boat would pass. Larry edged Billy out of the way and took his turn to get a look at the intruders.

“Watch this,” Larry whispered. He called through the crack, in a high whine, “Go ba-a-a-ack!”

“What was that?” the woman cried, looking around nervously.

“Beats me,” said the man.

“Stay away from the bridge,” Larry wailed, louder. “Go ba-a-a-ack!”

“Let’s get out of here,” said the woman.

The man hesitated, then turned the boat and headed toward the main part of the lake.

The boys smothered uncontrollable laughter.

“That was so cool!” Michael chortled. “Did you see her face?”

“We’d better scram,” Billy warned. “If they tell someone, my dad will be down here looking for an explanation.”

A week later, Billy gulped his cereal while Larry waited for him.

“What’s your hurry?” His father frowned at him over his newspaper.

“We’re going swimming with Mike,” Larry said quickly. The policeman’s uniform had never intimidated Larry, and he was always very matter-of-fact with Mr. Johnson.

“Well, be careful,” Billy’s father said. “I know you boys can swim like fish, but ...”

“We’ll be fine,” Billy assured him, dropping his cereal bowl into the sink.

“Stay away from the bridge,” his father called, as Larry opened the back door.

“Something funny is going on down there.”

Billy stopped in his tracks and turned back, his eyes wide. “Really?” Larry and Michael had coached him on the innocent stare.

“Yes, a fellow was out fishing yesterday, and he swore he heard Gomer Pyle near there, yelling at him to go away.”

“That is weird,” Larry said. He nudged Billy, and the two boys raced outside.

A small boat was nosing toward the channel below the bridge.

“What’ll I say?” Larry asked.

“Clint Eastwood,” Michael suggested. “*Make my day.*”

“No, do the Elmer Fudd thing,” Billy said.

The boat came closer, and Michael gasped. “They’ve got rifles in the boat.”

“So?” asked Larry. “They can’t get us here.”

“It’s not hunting season.” Billy peeked through the crack. “They’ve got other stuff, too. I see a TV.” He jerked back and stared at his friends. “Those are the guys who’ve been breaking into people’s camps!”

Larry and Michael gaped at him.

“What do we do now?” Michael whispered.

The boat was nearly even with them.

Officer Johnson was late for lunch. “So, Billy, what have you been up to?” he asked his son.

“Me? Nothing,” Billy mumbled. He was playing a video game, and he didn’t look up.

“I thought you boys went swimming this morning.”

“Uh, we did.”

“Really? See anything down at the lake?”

Billy swallowed hard and kept his eyes on the screen. “Couple of ducks.”

His father eyed him narrowly. “We got an anonymous tip at the police station about nine o’clock.”

“Oh?” Billy tried his best to keep his voice level.

“Yeah, somebody called in and said he saw two guys dump some guns and stuff in the water under the bridge. He gave us the number off their boat.”

“Did you catch ’em?” Billy asked.

“Yes, we did. We figure they’ve been responsible for all the break-ins this summer. I was surprised you boys didn’t show up when we were down there recovering the loot.”

“No, we got tired of swimming and went over to Larry’s house,” Billy said. “Did they confess?”

His father nodded. “Too bad you missed it. They said they dumped the loot and scooted because someone yelled that they were under arrest. No one chased them, and they thought they got away with it, but we caught up with them. We had two divers in the water for an hour. Guess what else they found?”

Billy couldn’t say anything.

“There’s a hole in the bridge support,” Mr. Johnson said. “We called the Department of Transportation to come look at it. They may have to do some repair on the bridge.”

“Really?” Billy’s voice cracked a little.

“Uh-huh. You know what was really funny?”

Billy shook his head.

“The guy who called in the tip sounded just like John Wayne.”

The End