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about 10,700 words

THE ELEVATOR FAMILY HITS THE ROAD  
by  
Douglas Evans

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Chapter One

The Wilson's green compact car rolled along the highway. With his large belly pressing against the steering wheel, Walter Wilson lowered the window and stuck out his elbow. He threw back his head and sang,

*"There was a boy who had a dog,  
And Bingo was his name-o.  
B-I-N-G-O B-I-N-G-O B-I-N-G-O,  
And Bingo was his name-o."*

In the back seat, the ten-year-old twins, Winslow and Whitney, groaned.

"That's the twelfth time you sang Bingo today," said Winslow.

"And we played I-Spy six times and the license plate game four times," said Whitney.

A buttery sun melting onto the road ahead reminded Walter of the hour. "Time to find a place to stay tonight, family," he said. "What's up the road, Winona?"

Winona Wilson in the passenger seat studied a highway map of Illinois. "This road is about to cross a wavy blue line," she said.

"Fantabulous" said Winslow. "That's the Mississippi River. M-i-s-s-i-s-s-i-p-p-i."

"I'm for sleeping on the banks of the Mississippi tonight," said Whitney. "i-p-p-i-s-s-i-s-s-i-m."

"The Mighty Missisip!...Father of Waters...The Big Muddy!" said Walter. Then he sang, "*Old Man River! That Old Man River! He just keeps rolling along!*"

Minutes later, the Wilson's compact passed a sign.

### **Toll Plaza Ahead**

"Toll Plaza!" said Winona. "That sounds like a pleasant place to stay."

"I remember reading *Eloise at the Plaza*," said Whitney. "She was living in a fancy hotel."

"The *Plaaawza!*" said Winslow.

Soon the green compact drove onto an iron bridge, spanning the wide, chocolate-colored Mississippi River. Ahead four small cabins stood across the right-hand side of the highway. Each had large windows on three sides and a wide door on the other. A single sunroof covered all four cabins.

Walter parked beside the cabin closest to the river. A big red 4 was stenciled on its front. A zebra-striped gate crossed the lane in front of the Wilson's car.

"Splendid! A gem of a place," Walter said. "Never seen anything like this Toll Plaza.

Little cabins under one long sunroof.”

“And the price is very affordable,” said Winona. “The sign says *Toll Five Dollars.*”

“And we’re not *by* the Mississippi, we’re over it,” said Winslow. “Fantabulous!”

Whitney spotted a person sitting in each of the other three cabins. “The rest of the toll cabins are taken,” she said. “We’re lucky cabin four is vacant.”

“All in favor of staying in this Toll Plaza cabin tonight say *one-Mississippi,*” said Walter.

“*One-Mississippi!*” the four Wilsons chorused.

The family piled out of the compact. They stood on a narrow cement patio in front of the little cabin.

At that moment, a silver sports car pulled up to the cabin next door. This cabin had a big **3** on it. The driver handed something to the woman inside and sped on. Shortly afterward a blue mini-van stopped at Toll 3. Two children in back pressed their noses against the window and waved to the Wilsons. The Wilsons waved back, as the van continued across the bridge.

“Very friendly people around here,” said Walter. “Only the best.”

“And this Toll Plaza seems very popular,” said Winona. “People are being turned away every minute.”

Whitney walked up to the vacant cabin. “Look, it has a Dutch door,” she said. She opened the bottom half of the door and then the top.

“There are even a telephone and a stool inside,” said Winslow. “And a fan to keep us cool. Fantabulous!”

“The cabin is just the right size to string our hammocks,” said Winona. “And the back shelf will come in handy for cooking.”

Together the Wilsons entered the cabin. The interior was bright and tidy. The view of the bridge and river out the large windows was spectacular.

“What a vista!” said Walter.

“This even beats the small windmill we stayed in last night,” said Winslow. “I liked the golf putting greens surrounding it, and all the people who were trying to putt golf balls beneath us.”

“My favorite place we’ve stayed on this trip was the long hut by the side of a baseball field,” said Whitney. “Every inning half the baseball players came to visit us.”

“Let’s unpack the compact,” said Winona. “With a little decorating, this toll cabin will fit our family just fine.”

Out the western window, a golden sun was dipping below the far side of the bridge. The Wilsons watched it slip away.

Walter put one arm around his wife and the other around the twins. “Yes, only the best for this family,” he said. “What more could we ask for?”

## Chapter Two

The Wilsons hung their hammocks across the little cabin, Walter a red one, Winona a blue one, Whitney a yellow one, and Winslow a green one. The twins placed their paperback books, Winona her sketch pad, and Walter his newspaper on the back shelf. They stuffed their pajamas and toothbrushes in the drawer under the shelf.

For a final touch, Walter took an embroidered sampler from the car trunk. He hung it on a hook by the Dutch door. It read:

HOME SWEAT HOME.

“A family tradition,” he said. “Home Sweat Home hangs wherever the Wilsons stay.”

“How long ago did the twins stitch that sign?” asked Winona.

Whitney and Winslow rolled their eyes.

“We were in second grade,” said Whitney. “Spelling wasn’t our best subject.”

“And you ask that question every night on this trip,” said Winslow.

Back on the cement patio, the twins set up lawn chairs and Winona the aluminum camp table. Walter assembled the barbecue grill.

“Hot dogs for dinner tonight,” he said. *“Hot diggity dog. We’re having hot dogs.”*

He filled the grill with charcoal and sprinkled on ample lighter fluid. A Greyhound bus was passing through the Toll Plaza when he threw in a match.

Phoom! A five-foot flame shot out of the grill.

“Drop in for dinner,” Walter called to the bus passengers who were staring out the bus windows. “There’s always room for guests wherever the Wilsons stay.”

As Walter grilled the hot dogs, Winona spread a checkered tablecloth across the table. From a picnic basket, she unpacked hot dog buns, mustard, and catsup.

“What a lovely place for a picnic,” she said. “A cool breeze, no bugs and plenty of scenery.”

Meanwhile, inside Toll 4 the twins were studying three light switches by the Dutch door.

“Eenie-meenie-minie-moe,” said Winslow, and he flipped the left-hand switch.

To his delight, an overhead fluorescent light flickered on.

“My turn,” said Winona, and she flipped the middle switch. This time a neon OPEN sign attached to the sunroof outside lit up with a green glow.

“Open?” she said. “What does that mean? What should we open?”

Together the twins flipped the third switch, and the zebra-striped gate that crossed the lane swung up.

“Fantabulous,” said Winona. “Now we can have visitors like the other cabins.”

At that moment, a black sedan drove up to the Dutch door. The driver wore a St. Louis Cardinals baseball hat on his head and a scowl on his face.

Walter waved his barbecue fork. “Greetings, friend! Lovely evening, isn’t it?”

The man held out a five-dollar bill to the twins and scowled some more.

Whitney shook her head. “Sorry, sir, keep your money,” she said. “This toll is already taken.”

The driver smiled for the first time. “Hey, thanks,” he said, and he drove away waving.

Seconds later, an eighteen-wheeler truck pulled up to the door. The twins pumped their fists up and down and the truck's horn blasted. *Burrrrrrp!*

"Care to join us for dinner?" Walter asked the driver.

"Kind of you to ask," the driver called down from his window. "But I have two-hundred more miles to drive this evening." He tried handing Whitney five dollars, but she refused him as she did the other.

"Come and get it, family!" Walter announced as the semi pulled away.

"Whitney, closed the gate," said Winona. "Every driver seems to think our cabin is available."

"Yes, I can see why Toll Plaza is so popular," said Walter. "You can't beat these accommodations! Only the best! The best east of the Mississippi, west of the Mississippi, and *above the Mississippi! Hot diggity-dog. We're having hot dogs.*"

### Chapter Three

Each Wilson loaded a hot dog onto a bun. Walter and Winona spread mustard on theirs while Whitney spread catsup on hers. Winslow, however, put on both mustard and catsup. He held up the orangey-pasted wiener for his family to see.

“This is what I call a *mussed-up* hot dog,” he said.

While the Wilsons ate their picnic dinner the sky turned purple. Lights from the town across the river began to twinkle, matching the twinkling lights of the countless fireflies on the near bank. Cars continued to swish by on the bridge, and the Mississippi River flowed lazily below.

“Marshmallow time,” said Winona. “Let’s have a contest. Whoever toasts the best-looking marshmallow is the winner.”

Winslow retrieved the marshmallow forks from the car trunk, and each Wilson speared a marshmallow. They held them over the glowing barbecue coals. Almost at once, Walter’s marshmallow burst into flames. He waved his fork until the flame went out, but too late. On the end of the fork hung a bubbly, black glob.

“Not the prettiest marshmallow in the world,” he said. “But it’s just how I like to eat them.”

As he spoke, a siren wailed. Racing toward the Toll Plaza in the opposite direction, blue lights flashing, was a black police motorcycle.

“A visitor from the other side of the bridge,” said Winona.

“Excellent!” said Walter. “Maybe he’s come to welcome us to his state.”

The motorcycle roared past the Toll Plaza, made a sharp U-turn, and stopped next to the Wilsons on the cement island.

A short, brawny policeman wearing a leather jacket swung his legs over the bike seat and strutted up to the grill. The sticker on his white helmet read:

MISSOURI STATE POLICE.

“Well, this beats all,” he said to no one in particular. “When a toll taker called to tell me a family had moved onto the bridge, I thought she was pulling my leg.”

“We just checked in,” Walter told him. “We’re the Wilsons, the new toll takers.”

“Toll Four is just the kind of place our family prefers to stay in, small and tidy,” said Winona. “We’re a tightly-knit family.”

The policeman pulled a spiral notebook from his back pocket. “Well, lady, I have half a mind to throw you in a place that’s even smaller and tidier than this. It also has stiff bars to keep you there.”

At that moment, another siren blared. Soon a white police car pulled up to the zebra-striped gate. Words on the side read:

ILLINOIS STATE POLICE.

Out of the squad car stepped a tall, lanky policeman. Pushing back the brim of his hat with a thumb, he addressed the first officer. “What do we have here, Fred?”

The Illinois policeman waved his notebook.

“Now we’ve been through this before, Ed,” he said. “This toll plaza is in my state, so I’m in charge here.”

He pointed to a sign riveted to the side of the bridge:

**WELCOME TO MISSOURI.**

“Well, that’s not how we see it in Illinois, Fred,” said the second policeman. “The sign on the other end of the bridge says **WELCOME TO ILLINOIS**. So officially we’re in my state.”

“Drat!” Walter suddenly shouted. Another of his marshmallows was on fire.

The two policemen paused to watch Walter whip his long fork in the air as if he were sword fighting and then resumed arguing.

“Ed, this is the great state of Missouri,” said the motorcycle cop. “And since this family is breaking Missouri trespassing laws I’m going to give them a fistful of tickets and move them out.”

“Sorry, Fred,” the Illinois policeman said. “This family is roasting marshmallows in my state. So I’ll say if they stay here or not.”

The men might have gone on bickering if Whitney and Winslow hadn’t held their marshmallow forks toward them. At the end were two toasted marshmallows with golden-brown sides.

“Have one,” they said together.

“Will you look at that!” said Fred. “I haven’t seen such finely toasted marshmallows in all my days camping around a campfire.” He plucked the marshmallow off Winslow’s fork.

“That’s a beauty, young lady,” Ed said to Whitney. “A real work of art.” And he removed hers.

Together the policemen placed the marshmallows on their tongues.

“Deeeeeeelicious,” said Fred. “Best marshmallow in the state of Missouri.”

Ed licked a thread of marshmallow off his lip. “Nothing like it in the entire state of Illinois.”

The pair looked toward the Wilsons still standing around the glowing grill.

“Tell you what, Ed,” said Fred, flipping his ticket book closed. “It’s getting late. I suppose this matter can wait until tomorrow when I can talk to the Missouri state judge.”

“Yep, we’ve been arguing about this toll plaza for ten years now, Fred,” said Ed. “No chance of getting anything settled tonight. I say we call it a day, and I’ll talk to the Illinois state judge tomorrow.”

Fred mounted his motorcycle and revved up the motor. “Enjoy your night in Missouri, Wilsons,” he called out. Then he roared off across the bridge.

“See you tomorrow, folks,” said Ed, climbing into his squad car. “Hope you like it here in Illinois.”

As the second officer sped away, Walter raised another flaming marshmallow off the grill. “Not the prettiest thing in the world,” he said, studying the black blob on the end of his fork. “But it’s just how I like eating them. Just fine with me. Well done. Good and toasted. Only the best.”

## Chapter Four

*Beep! Beep! Screeeeech! Varoom! Honk!*

Before sunrise the next morning, the sound of traffic woke the Wilsons.

Walter sat up in his hammock, scratching his belly. Headlights flashed on the glass surrounding him. The top half of the Dutch door was open, and a man dressed in a gray uniform and a gray hat sat on the stool.

The zebra-striped gate was up, and the OPEN sign glowed. One by one cars stopped by the door. Each driver handed the man some money.

“Mornin’, thanks. Mornin’, thank you,” the man said.

“Greetings, sir,” Walter called out. “Visitors are always welcome in Toll 4.”

The man turned. “Mornin’ to you. Charlene next door told me a family was sleeping in here. Most excitin’ thing that’s happened on this bridge in years. Another day; another handful of five-dollar bills. That’s how it is most of the time. I hope I didn’t disturb you.”

Winona sat up, rubbing her eyes. “You must be here to take over our cabin,” she said. “We didn’t know checkout time was this early.”

“Yep, I’ve been takin’ tolls on this bridge for over forty years,” said the man. “My name’s Huckleberry, by the way.”

“We’re the Wilsons,” said Walter. “I’m Walter and this is Winona. Next comes Whitney, and that’s Winslow still snoozing in the far hammock.”

Whitney sat up. “Huckleberry, did you say your name is?” she asked. “Like the boy in Mark Twain’s book *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*?”

“Yep, that’s who I was named after, on account I was born on the banks of the Mississippi just like Huckleberry Finn himself,” said the man. He took a five-dollar bill from a man in a blue pickup. “Fact is. I was raised on the Mississippi and went to school on the Mississippi. I wed on the Mississippi and worked here above the Mississippi all my life. I’ve traveled up and down the Mississippi many times, but have never traveled east or west of the Mississippi for more than a mile.”

Huck accepted a ten-dollar bill from a man in a cement truck and handed five dollars back to him.

“Huckleberry Finn ran away and floated down the river,” said Winona.

“Yep, often I sit up here starin’ down at the Mississippi and think about Huck Finn fishin’ on his raft,” said the man. He gazed longingly upon the river.

“Yep, even from up here I can see catfish jumpin’,” he said. “Yep, if I had one wish, I’d wish to be down there right now, fishin’ on the river like Huck Finn did.”

As the man collected another five-dollar bill, Walter looked toward Winona and nodded. Winona nodded toward the twins, and the twins nodded toward Walter.

“Well, Huck, quit wishing and go fishing,” Walter said. “If you’d let us, we’d like to take Toll Four for another day.”

“We’d love to stay longer here in Illinois or Missouri or whatever state we’re in,” said Winona. Huckleberry leaped off his stool. “You wouldn’t mind taking over for me?” he said. “I mean, it’s not the most excitin’ place to be. Another day; another handful of paper bills. And I gotta warn you, some drivers can be downright rude, especially during Rush Hour when it can get mighty busy.”

“This bridge couldn’t get busier than the small red room we stayed in during our trip to England,” said Whitney.

“Lots of people dropped by every to use our telephone,” said Winslow.

Huckleberry flipped a switch, and the zebra-striped gate closed. “Then I reckon’ number four is all yours,” he said. “I hate to leave you right before the mornin’ rush, but now’s the best time for catchin’ catfish.”

“We even have a fishing pole you can use,” said Walter. He tumbled out of his hammock and led Huck to the compact. From the trunk, he took a bamboo pole, marshmallows for bait, and a straw hat.

Huck replaced his gray hat with the straw one. He untucked his shirt and removed his shoes and socks. Waving to the Wilsons with the fishing pole, he strolled along the walkway toward Illinois.

“Yep, Old Huck is goin’ fishin’” he called out. “I’m off to catch some catfish in the Old Mississippi.”

At that moment, the sun peered over the Illinois horizon. Golden sunbeams spread onto the bridge, lighting up the Toll Plaza.

Walter stepped to the guardrail. “Rise and shine, Wilsons. We’ve had a lucky break? We can stay at the Toll Plaza for another day.”

## Chapter Five

“One-Mississippi, two-Mississippi, three-Mississippi.”

Walter stood on the cement patio doing his morning toe-touching exercises. “Four-Mississippi, five-Mississippi.”

A newspaper van drove up next door. Walter raised a finger, and the driver tossed a newspaper onto the patio.

“Excellent service at this Toll Plaza,” Walter said. “How about pancakes for breakfast?”

Inside the little cabin, Winona lit the Colman stove, while Walter mixed a batch of pancake batter.

“Today my pancakes will be in the shape of different states in the United States,” he told his family, as he greased up a frying pan. “You must guess the state before you eat the pancake.”

Winona, Winslow, and Whitney sat around the aluminum table. Walter placed the first pancake on Winona’s plate. She studied it a moment before saying, “New York!”

“Right you are, my dear!” said Walter. “You may chow down.”

“You’re a pancake artist, Walter,” said Winona. Then she poured syrup on the spot where New York City would be and began to eat.

Whitney received the next pancake. “South Carolina!” she said, and she, too, began eating.

Winslow, however, frowned at the pancake

Walter gave him. It was smaller no larger than a quarter. "Rhode Island," he grumbled.

"Come on, Dad. I'm starving."

"Then make way for the biggest pancake this side of the Mississippi," Walter said, and he placed a pancake on Winslow's plate so large that it hung over the sides.

Winslow smiled. "Alaska!" he said.

While the Wilsons had breakfast, more and more cars appeared on the bridge. They formed long lines outside the other three toll cabins.

"This must be what Huckleberry called Rush Hour," said Winslow.

"Odd to have an hour just for rushing," said Whitney.

"What's the rush?" said Walter.

"Why don't we open our gate and find out where everyone is rushing to?" said Winona.

She entered the cabin and flipped the gate switch. The moment the zebra-striped gate opened, a red pickup truck stopped at the Dutch door. The driver, a bearded man in blue overalls, handed Winona a ten-dollar bill.

"Lovely morning, isn't it?" Winona said.

"I wish I could enjoy it," said the driver. "But I have seven lawns to mow this morning. I'd like some change."

"A change can be very rewarding," said Winona. "That's why my family likes to travel."

She handed the man back the bill. "And you can keep this money. All the tolls are taken for today."

“Well, thanks, lady,” said the driver. “That starts my day out pleasantly for a change.”

While Walter read the newspaper and the twins their paperback books, Winona chatted with more drivers who passed Toll 4. She talked with a large man in a small green Ford, followed by a pretty woman in a Chevy. Next came a teenager who drove a Volkswagen van, and a silver-haired woman driving a blue Honda. Every driver tried handing her five dollars, but she always refused.

“Walter, I’m meeting the most interesting people,” she said. “They all want to leave money for Toll 4.”

*Honk! Honk!* came from the cars before the Dutch door.

Walter lowered his newspaper. “But they all are rushing somewhere,” he said.

“Not only is that annoying, but also rude,” said Winslow

“I have an idea,” said Winona. Then she disappeared into the toll cabin.

Soon a sign hung in the front window of Toll 4. It read:

**No rushing in this lane.  
The Wilson Family**

## Chapter Six

Around ten o'clock the traffic dwindled. Winona closed the gate and joined her family on the patio.

"Who's up for a walk?" asked Walter. "It's time we met our neighbors."

Together the four Wilsons crossed the lane to Toll 3. At the door stood a woman of about thirty with long black hair. Her toll-takers hat sat far back on her head. Behind her, a radio blared the morning news.

"Greetings, neighbor," said Walter. "We're the Wilsons, the toll takers next door."

The woman turned down her radio. "Thanks for stopping by," she said. "I'm Charlene. I don't get much company on this bridge."

At that moment, a green Buick stopped at the door, and the driver handed Charlene five one-dollar bills.

"Have a good day," she said.

"I see drivers give you money, too, Charlene," said Winona. "People who pass through this Toll Plaza are so kind."

Charlene's thin eyebrows crept up her forehead. "Gotta pay for this bridge somehow, honey," she said.

"You mean you're buying this bridge?" Winslow asked. "Fantabulous!"

"Bridges must be expensive," said Whitney.

"Once a man tried selling me the Brooklyn Bridge," Walter said. "But it was so old and dirty, I decided to pass."

Again, Charlene's eyebrows rose. "Wise decision, honey. Now I better attend to my job. Have a good day."

The Wilsons waved and moved on to Toll 2.

Inside this cabin sat a man with a blond ponytail. He wore a jeans jacket and blue jeans. "Howdy, my name's Gene," he said. "You folks lost? Car trouble?"

"We're the Wilsons, and we're staying in Toll Four," said Walter.

Winona peered into the cabin. "Are you staying here by yourself?" she asked. "You must get lonely."

"Not at all," said Gene. "This is the only peaceful place I get to sit all day."

As he spoke the phone on the wall rang.

"But even on this bridge the peace and quiet doesn't last long," the man said, picking up the receiver. "I'll catch you folks later. I have to answer this call."

The Wilsons stepped to Toll 1. Behind this Dutch door sat a woman, who also had a blond ponytail. She also wore a jeans jacket and blue jeans and was also talking on the phone.

A little girl in denim overalls sat on the back shelf. "Swimming! Swimming!" she shouted. "Ducks! Ducks!"

"Yes, it is! No, I didn't!" the woman said into her phone. "I'm afraid you did! No, it isn't! Good-bye!"

She hung up the phone and addressed her visitors. "You must be the Wilsons. I'm Jean. My husband, Gene, said you were coming over."

Winona glanced back at Toll 2. "So you're married to Gene next door?" she asked.

"Gene and Jean. A pair of jeans," said Walter.

"Swimming! Swimming!" cried the toddler on the shelf. "Ducks! Ducks!"

The woman sighed and picked up the girl. "And this is our daughter Genie," she said.

"She must have her father's genes. Very stubborn."

"I wanna go swimming!" the girl wailed. "I want to swim with the ducks."

"She also has a great pair of lungs," said Walter.

"I'm afraid Genie is a little ornery today," said Jean. "The terrible twos. She doesn't like coming to the Toll Plaza, but Gene and I couldn't find a sitter. I took her for the first hour. Now Gene is supposed to take her for the next hour, but he says he's too busy to collect her."

"We'll walk Genie over for you," said Winona. "We're heading back that way."

"Oh, would you?" said Jean. "Neither Gene or I knew how much trouble having a two-year-old would be. We argue all the time."

"So that explains why they're staying in separate cabins," said Walter.

After saying good-bye to Jean, the Wilsons dropped Genie off with Gene in Toll 2.

They passed Toll 3, waving to Charlene, and finally plopped into the lounge chairs outside Toll 4.

"What wonderful neighbors we have at this Toll Plaza," said Winona.

"Only the best," said Walter. "We must invite them over some evening for a game of bridge. *Ha! Ha!* Get it? Bridge on the bridge. *Ha! Ha! Haaa!*"

## Chapter Seven

For the next half-hour, Walter read the newspaper, while Winona drew cars in her sketchbook. The twins went for a hike on the walkway that ran along the side of the bridge. They found three hubcaps. Back at the cabin they strung the shiny discs together with fishing line and hung them from the sunroof. When the revolving hubcaps caught the sunlight, they flashed. When a breeze blew they clanged together.

“It’s a modern sculpture,” Whitney explained.

“We’re calling it Hubcap Sunrise,” said Winslow.

“At least they’ll keep the crows away,” said Walter.

Winona erased a line on her paper. “Oh, I wish the people in the cars would stop long enough for me to sketch them.”

At that moment, a white convertible pulled up to the zebra-striped gate. The top was down, and a woman of about eighteen sat behind the wheel. Smoke poured from under the hood.

“Just what I need,” she said. “Car problems right in the middle of nowhere.”

Winona set down her sketchbook. “You’re never nowhere, dear,” she said to the teenager. “Especially when you’re here.”

The girl climbed from the car. “Well, I’m stuck *here* wherever here is,” she said. “My car’s been smoking for the last ten miles.”

“Smoking is a bad habit, young lady,” said Walter. “From the sound of your engine, you have a bad doohickey on the third thingamajig.”

The teenager frowned. "Just what I need, car repair bills. I guess I'll hike into town and find a tow truck. And my name's not *young lady*. It's Faith."

"No need to go anywhere, Faith," said Walter. "I can fix that car in a jiffy."

"Walter loves tinkering with motors," Winona said. "Why don't you sit down? I'll fix some lemonade, and we can chat while Walter tinkers."

The girl shrugged. "Why not?" she said. "I wasn't heading anywhere anyway."

Walter rolled up his sleeves and approached the convertible. He popped open the hood and leaned far over the engine. He hummed while he worked.

Meanwhile, Winona mixed lemonade in a plastic pitcher. She served a glass to Faith and the twins, and they all sat in lounge chairs on the cement patio.

"Tell us about yourself, Faith," Winona asked. "Where are you from?"

Faith sipped from her glass. "There's not much to tell."

"Faith's from New York," said Whitney. "I know from her license plates."

"I was from New York," Faith said. "I'm driving out West to start a new life."

"A new life?" said Winona. "Aren't your parents worried about you?"

Faith shook her head. "My parents? They never care about anything I do. I doubt they even know I'm gone."

Walter stepped out from under the hood. He held a small metal rod. "Here's the gizmo that broke off the whatchamacallit causing the thingamabob to smoke," he said. "I'll phone an auto shop and have a new doodad delivered to our Toll Plaza."

"Fantabulous!" said Winslow. "That means Faith can stay longer."

"Hope you don't mind being stuck here in the middle of nowhere," said Whitney.

“Oh, I don’t mind,” the teenager replied. “This rest *is* just what I needed. I’ve been driving all night.”

Forty minutes later, a brown UPS van drove up to the zebra-striped gate. A stocky woman in a brown shirt, shorts, and cap stepped out.

“Delivery for Toll Four,” she said. “And I’m telling you, I’ve done hundreds of deliveries on either side of this bridge, but never *on* the bridge.

Walter inspected the auto part the lady handed him. “Just the thingy I need,” he said.

*Clang! Clang!* A breeze blew and stirred the hubcaps dangling under the sunroof.

“Isn’t that beautiful?” said the UPS lady. “I’m telling you, this Toll Plaza has never looked lovelier.”

“It’s modern art,” said Whitney.

“We call it Hubcap Sensation,” Winslow added.

“And there’s not a crow in sight,” said Walter.

## Chapter Eight

After the UPS truck left, another small truck, this one painted mustard yellow, drove onto the bridge. Words on its side read:

MOM'S JUST CHICKEN WAGON  
GOOD LUNCHESES AND DINNERS

"Lunchtime," Walter said. "And you must stay for lunch, Faith. The service at this Toll Plaza is excellent. I'll fix your car right after we eat"

The yellow van was heading toward Toll 2, but Walter waved it over to Toll 4.

The driver rolled down his window. He was an older man with a potbelly and thin gray hair. One sleeveless arm bore a tattoo of a chicken.

"You open?" he asked.

"The Wilsons are always open for guests," said Walter.

"We were wondering if *you* were open," said Winona. "We'd like to have lunch on our patio."

The driver looked at Walter, Winona, Whitney, Winslow, and Faith. "Don't see why not," he said. "Business is business."

The man disappeared into the truck and seconds later a wide window on the side rolled open. The man stood behind a counter wearing a paper apron and hat.

"It'll take a few minutes for the fryers to heat up," he said.

"Where's Mom?" asked Whitney.

"You're looking at him," said the man. "My real name's Milton Oliver Montgomery."

But friends call me Mom.”

Walter drummed his finger on his large stomach. “What’s for lunch, Mom?” he asked.

“Chicken. What else? Fried chicken, baked chicken, curried chicken, chicken kabobs, chicken nuggets, chicken burritos, chicken and dumplings, chicken pot pie, chicken fritters, or chicken on a stick. You name it, as long it has chicken in it.”

“How’s business been?” asked Winona.

“Business is business,” Mom repeated. “But to tell you the truth, I think my customers are getting tired of just chicken. To tell you the truth, I’m getting tired of cooking just chicken.”

At that moment, Huckleberry came strolling up the walkway. He held the bamboo pole in one hand and a string of large catfish in the other. When he reached the Toll Plaza, his suntanned face broke out in a wide grin.

“What a morning of fishin’, Wilsons,” he said. “Walter, your marshmallow bait worked wonders. The second my hook touched the water a catfish attacked it. I caught enough fish for everyone.”

Walter’s eyes went from the fish to the lunch truck. “Mom, forget about cooking chicken for lunch,” he said. “Let’s have fresh catfish instead. I’ll fry them myself, using our famous Wilson Fish Batter recipe.”

Winona gave Walter a look. “I didn’t know we had a famous Wilson Fish Batter,” she said.

“It’s so secret I’m the only Wilson who knows the secret ingredient,” said Walter. “Is that all right with you Mom?”

“Anything besides chicken is fine with me,” the man said.

As Huckleberry talked something behind him went “*Ruff! Ruff!*” The man stepped aside to reveal a scruffy gray dog. Long eyebrows hid his eyes and a gray mustache hid his mouth. “*Ruff! Ruff!*”

“Who’s your friend, Huck?” asked Walter.

“While I was fishin’ this old pooch came wanderin’ up the bank, sniffin’ at things,” the man said. “Whenever a catfish fell off my hook, he pounced on it before it got away. I named him Cat on account of he’s so good at catchin’ catfish.”

Cat wagged his long mop of a tail. “*Ruff! Ruff!*”

“Poor thing,” said Faith. “He doesn’t seem to have a home.

Whitney pulled a hubcap off the hubcap sculpture and filled it with water. “Cat can use this for a water dish,” she said.

“The fat is ready for frying,” Mom said from the lunch truck.

“Excellent,” said Walter. “Time to whip up my secret batter.”

“Whitney and Winslow, come help me clean these catfish,” Huckleberry said.

“Faith and I will slice some potatoes,” said Winona. “We’ll have catfish and French fries.”

The group ate lunch in a circle on the patio. There were plenty of fish and fries for everyone.

“Fantabulous fish, Dad,” said Winslow.

“Best fish I’ve ever had,” Whitney agreed.

“Mmm, mmm,” said Faith. “There’s nothing like this in New York.”

“*Ruff! Ruff!*” went Cat, who also had his share of catfish.

“What *did* you put in the Wilson Fish Batter to make the fish so crisp and fluffy, Walter?” asked Mom.

“Sorry my lips are sealed,” Walter said.

“*Ruff! Ruff!*” The dog, all eyelashes and whiskers, stood by the lunch wagon. In his mouth was an empty root beer can.

The group broke out laughing.

“Walter, you mixed *root beer* with flour, didn’t you?” said Winona. “Root beer and flour is the secret Wilson Family Recipe?”

“Cat let the cat out of the bag,” said Walter.

Mom wiped his hands on his apron. “Well, folks, I’m headed to the county fair across the river. And if you don’t mind, Walter, I’d like to try out your root-beer batter catfish on the crowd this evening.”

“The recipe is all yours, Mom,” Walter said. “Just change the name on your van to Mom’s Chicken and Catfish Wagon.

Mom turned toward Huckleberry. “What do you say, Huck? If you’ll do the catchin’, I’ll do the cookin’. We’ll split the profits fifty-fifty.”

“If the Wilsons wouldn’t mind taking over this toll cabin another day,” Huck replied.

The four Wilsons were too busy eating catfish and French fries to do anything but nod.

## Chapter Nine

Full of pep, promise, and the smell of catfish, Mom and Huckleberry drove off in the lunch wagon.

After Walter fixed Faith's car, Whitney said, "Let's go to the fair, too. Ferris wheels, farm animals, and fun houses."

"Ring toss games, roller-coasters, and rock n' roll," said Winslow.

"You young'uns go," said Walter. "The old folks will stay here and relax this afternoon."

Whitney grabbed Faith by one hand and Winslow took the other. Before the teenager could object, the twins pulled her to the convertible. The three sat in the front seat.

"Would you believe I've never been to a county fair before," Faith said. "This will be something new."

No sooner had the teenager and twins left than the blasts of two police sirens shook the Toll Plaza. Ed, in his Illinois squad car, drove up to one side of the zebra-striped gate, while Fred on his Missouri police motorcycle roared up to the other. The two officers exchanged scowls.

"*Ruff! Ruff!*" went Cat.

"Greetings, officers," said Walter. "Nice of you fellows to drop by again."

Each policeman held up a picture of a girl. Underneath were the words:

## TEENAGER MISSING

Name: Faith Harding

Home: New York, NY

"Either of you seen this girl?" Ed asked. "Her car's been spotted in Illinois."

"She's probably headed for Missouri by way of this bridge," said Fred.

Walter and Winona studied the face on the poster, the face of their new guest, Faith.

Walter rubbed his chin. "So many people come and go around here," he said.

"Is this girl in trouble?" asked Winona.

"Faith Harding disappeared from her home three days ago," said Ed. "Her parents are worried silly about her."

"Probably just another runaway," said Fred. "If you see her, give a call to the Missouri State Police."

"Remember you're in Illinois now," said Ed. "So the Illinois State Police can handle this case best."

The policemen exchanged sour looks and returned to their vehicles. They made sharp U-turns and sped away.

Walter gazed out over the river. "Now we know Faith's not driving toward a new life, but running away from her old one."

"Oh, Walter, what will we say to her when she returns from the fair?" said Winona

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it," said Walter. "Right now, it's a perfect time for a stroll across *our* bridge? Shall we?"

Winona took Walter by the arm. Together they started up the sidewalk that ran along the side of the bridge. Cat trotted at their heels.

The late afternoon was warm, and the soft smell of summer filled the air. The chocolaty Mississippi flowed beneath them without a ripple. Overhead, scissor-tailed swallows zipped in and out of the iron arches.

“Bobby B. Bridges Memorial Bridge,” Walter read off a sign. “Bobby B. Bridges must be the current owner of the bridge.” He continued to read signs. “No stopping on bridge. No diving from bridge. No passing on bridge. No throwing objects off bridge. No fishing from bridge. Mr. Bridges doesn’t seem to like having fun.”

“Walter, I wonder why Faith ran away,” said Winona. “Why did she say her parents don’t care about her?”

Walter kept reading signs. “For emergency use only. Speed zone ahead.”

“I just can’t imagine anyone wanting to run away from their family,” said Winona.

At the end of the bridge, stood FRANK’S FISHING BAIT AND FOOD MART. Inside, Walter and Winona bought some hamburger meat and buns for dinner.

“Here’s the perfect dessert,” said Walter, in the snack section. “Tollhouse cookies!”

Hand in hand, they started back to the Toll Plaza. By the time they arrived the sun had set, turning the sky purple.

“Faith should be back with the twins any minute now,” said Walter.

“But I still don’t know what to say to her about Ed and Fred’s visit,” said Winona.

Walter bit into a cookie. “Not a thing. Our walk cleared my head. I now have a plan.”

He entered Toll 4 and picked up the telephone. Winona watched him chat with a mysterious someone. As he hung up the phone, car headlights lit up the cabin windows. A horn honked, and the white convertible stopped at the gate.

Faith and Whitney sat in the front seat. Winslow sat in back with a giant stuffed panda. All three held clouds of cotton candy and were singing a rap song along with the radio.

Walter waved and joined Winona on the patio.

“What was that call about?” she asked him.

“A surprise,” said Walter. “Only the best! You’ll have to wait until tomorrow night to see what it is.”

Meanwhile, Faith and the twins had climbed from the car and ran back toward the Missouri shore, laughing and singing. There they raced up and down the riverbank catching fireflies. They put the blinking insects in a plastic bag, and back at the Toll Plaza, released them inside Toll 4. Soon the cabin was twinkling as much as both riverbanks and the sky above the bridge.

## Chapter Ten

*Honk! Beep! Beep! Honk!*

Traffic woke the Wilsons again the next morning.

Walter sat up. "That morning alarm does an excellent job," he said. "But it's hard to turn off."

Out the window, he spotted Faith snuggled up in the front seat of her car. For an instant, the bear in back alarmed him, until he remembered that Whitney had won it throwing darts at the county fair.

A newspaper plopped onto the patio, and the newspaperman waved to Walter.

"Good morning, Walter," Charlene called from Toll 3.

"Yes, it's another bracing morning on the bridge," Walter said. "Rise and shine, everyone!"

While the Wilsons rolled out of their hammocks, Faith appeared in the doorway. "I guess it's time to say good-bye," she said. "I guess I've been in your way long enough."

"Nonsense, dear," said Winona. "There's plenty of room. You can stay as long as you like."

"You must come to our cookout tonight," said Walter. "We're inviting all our new friends and neighbors."

Faith smiled. "In that case, I guess I'll just drive into town and do some errands. See you later."

For breakfast, Walter grilled pancakes in the shape of famous buildings--the Eiffel

Tower, the Gateway Arch, the Taj Mahal, and he surprised Winslow with a foot-long Empire State Building pancake.

Afterward, Winona placed a new sign in the toll cabin window:

WINONA'S ADVICE BOOTH  
\$5.00  
HELP BUY THE BRIDGE

"Yesterday, drivers were eager to tell me their problems," she said. "This Rush Hour I'll accept their money in exchange for sound Wilson wisdom."

Winona's first customer was a man in a white van. "I just had a fight with my daughter," he said. "She's in fourth grade, Winona. I feel bad that she went to school mad and angry at me."

Winona leaned forward on her stool and nodded. "I understand your concern," she said. "But perhaps that's all water under the bridge by now. When your daughter comes home from school, make sure to listen to her, and I bet she's forgotten all about your argument."

The man's eyes lit up. "You think so, Winona? Yea, maybe you're right. Maybe when Annie comes home she'll be eager to tell me all about her day as always."

The man grinned as he handed Winona five dollars and drove away.

The next driver was a teenage girl in a blue Prius, who thought school was a waste of time since she wanted to become a singer, so she saw no point in studying history or science or math.

Again, Winona leaned forward. "Don't burn your bridges before you cross them," she said.

The teenager nodded slowly. "Oh, wow. I think I know what you're saying, Winona. Wow. You're saying I should stay in school *and* practice my singing at the same time. That's what my parents say. Oh, wow. Excellent advice, Winona. Thanks."

That morning the sky was cloudless. By the time Rush Hour was over, the sun was baking the bridge. The Wilsons sat under the sunroof in swimsuits, fanning themselves with paper plates.

"It's too hot to hoot," said Walter. "But I see a way we can cool off."

A pickup truck had stopped next door. In the back was a stack of inflated black inner tubes.

Walter bought four tubes from the driver, and the Wilsons, with inner tubes around their middles, climbed down the riverbank to the Mississippi River.

"*Ruff! Ruff!*" went Cat, scampering after them.

Walter stuck a toe into the water. "Brrr. Forget it."

"The last one in is a river rat!" the twins cried, and they leaped in. Their tall splashes soaked Walter, leaving him any excuse not to jump in himself.

The current carried the Wilsons downstream at a lazy pace. They drifted under the bridge and past a marina.

"Greetings!" Walter called to an elderly couple on a houseboat. "Wonderful day to be on the river, isn't it?"

"What a lovely compact, floating house you have," said Winona.

A tugboat pushing three giant barges in the shape of cereal boxes chugged past the family. *Phoooot!* blasted its horn. The tugboat engine sent a high wave rolling toward them.

“Hold on, everyone,” said Walter. “We’re in for a wild ride.”

Up and down, up and down went the inner tubes. Up and down, up and down went the Wilsons

“Yahoo!” Winslow cried

“Wheeeee!” shouted Whitney.

“I think I’m going to be sick,” Walter moaned.

Farther downriver the family floated up to a raft made of logs. A man wearing a straw hat and cut-off jeans sat on the edge, fishing.

No one recognized the fisherman until he pushed back his straw hat.

“Huckleberry!” the family said as one.

“How’s the catfish business, Huck?” Walter asked

“Your root beer batter was a huge success at the fair,” the man replied. “I reckon Mom’s gonna need twice as many fish this evening. Yep, what can be better than sittin’ and fishin’ on the old Mississip?”

The Wilsons drifted on. The summer sun continued to beat down on them. While Winslow, Winona, and Whitney wore T-shirts, Walter only had on his swim trunks. Already his round belly was as red as a raspberry.

“Walter, I think you should cover up a bit,” said Winona.

“Nonsense,” said Walter. “A little sun is good for you. Rich in vitamin D.”

As he spoke merry calliope music drifted up the river.

“Sounds like a circus is coming!” said Whitney.

“Or a merry-go-round,” said Winslow.

A minute later, a colossal steam paddleboat appeared around the bend. Its four white decks, tiered and decorated like a birthday cake, gleamed in the sun.

Ropes of steam rose from the twin smokestacks.

Its name, THE MISSISSIPPI QUEEN, was printed on the side, and in the rear, a big paddlewheel churned up the water.

As the boat passed the Wilsons, tourists leaned over the rails and waved. Whitney and Winslow pumped their fists in the air until *Phooooooooot!* The steam whistle bellowed, deep and loud.

*"That old man river!"* Walter sang out. *"That old man river! He just keeps rolling along."*

"Let's float to New Orleans," said Winslow.

"And across the ocean to Europe," said Whitney.

Winona looked upstream. "Walter, we've floated a long way. I can't even see our bridge. How *are* we going to get back to the Toll Plaza?"

"No worry," Walter said. "Things have a way of working out for the Wilson family."

Right then, the Wilsons heard *Ruff! Ruff!* from the riverbank. Cat and Faith stood on a boat ramp next to Faith's convertible.

"Need a lift?" Faith called out.

Arms and legs splashed, as the Wilsons paddled to shore. They loaded the inner tubes into Faith's trunk and piled into the car.

"Oooooo!" went Walter, sitting in the back. His belly and shoulders were shiny red.

Faith pressed a button, and the car top closed.

“Someone got too much sun today,” she said.

“Oooooo!” Walter repeated. “Yes, perhaps a tad too much vitamin D.”

## Chapter Eleven

Back at Toll 4, the Wilsons and Faith prepared for the party.

Walter, careful not to let anything touch his tender belly, poured charcoal in the grill. He sprinkled on ample lighter fluid, tossed in a match, and *Phoom!* Flames shot toward the clouds.

The twins took charge of decorations and entertainment. First, they drew wild designs across the cement patio with colored chalk. Next, using strips of Walter's newspaper, they made long paper chains and strung them around the toll cabin.

Meanwhile, Faith sat in her car planning the party music. She explained, "We'll leave the car doors open and have an awesome sound system for dancing tonight."

For her part, Winona tidied up the little cabin. She dusted the shelves and washed the windows. While polishing the knobs on the Dutch door, she watched Faith and the twins.

"Walter, doesn't Faith look much happier since coming here?" she said. "But I'm still worried she'll leave us soon."

Walter shifted the coals in the grill. "Don't worry, my dear. This man has a plan."

A short while later, the brown UPS truck stopped at the gate. The woman in the brown uniform stepped out and handed Walter a box. "Here are the ribs you ordered, Mr. Wilson."

"Excellent timing, madam," said Walter. "And be sure to come to our cookout tonight. We're having spareribs smothered in Wilson Barbecue Sauce. It will be the best

party east of the Mississippi, west of the Mississippi, and above the Mississippi.”

Soon the sun set. Crickets chirped under the bridge, and fireflies flashed on the riverbank.

“Our guests should arrive shortly,” said Walter.

Charlene showed up first. She looked beautiful dressed in a yellow sundress with her hair piled on top of her head. “I found a substitute to take over my toll cabin tonight,” she said. “Someone has to collect those dollars.”

Walter, who was wearing a mushroom chef’s hat and an apron that said KISS THE COOK, dropped a sparerib on the grill. “I’ve grown as fond of this bridge as you, Charlene,” he said. “If you don’t buy it from Bobby B. Bridges, maybe I will.”

Next Fred and Ed arrived with their wives Meg and Peg. The UPS lady came wearing a brown dress followed by Mom, Huckleberry, and the newspaper reporter. Gene and Jean showed up with Genie between them.

“I wanna go swimming with the ducks!” the toddler screamed.

Walter banged the dangling hubcaps with his cooking fork. “Come and get it, folks,” he called out. “The ribs are ready.”

The meal was excellent. Besides barbecued ribs, the guests enjoyed fresh corn on the cob bought from a farmer who had driven through the Toll Plaza that afternoon, and a chocolate drink made by Winslow.

“I call it Mississippi Mud,” he said.

For dessert, Whitney and Winslow amazed the crowd with their perfectly toasted marshmallows. Each time they lifted another golden one away from the coals the guests

applauded. They served them pressed between two tollhouse cookies and a square of milk chocolate.

“Our new creation,” said Winslow.

“We call these Tollhouse S’mores,” said Whitney.

After dinner, Walter told a story about the Wilson’s stay in New York City. “We loved the bright lights and friendly people,” he said. “We were lucky to find a small, cozy room outside a Broadway theater to stay in. It had windows on all sides like these toll cabins. Many people came to visit at the front window, but they left when Winona handed them tickets she found in a drawer.”

Walter took a gulp of Mississippi Mud before continuing. “The next night the room we stayed in had one long window. It was in front of a department store and was fully furnished. All evening we sat on the sofa, watching the people of New York stroll by on the sidewalk.”

As Walter talked, Winona watched Faith. The teenager sat alone on the hood of her car. She had put on a brightly printed dress and stuck daisies in her hair.

“Your father’s plans are always brilliant,” she whispered to Whitney and Winslow. “But what could he have cooked up this time that would prevent Faith from leaving tomorrow

Walter had just finished his story when headlights lit up the patio. A yellow taxicab stopped at the zebra-striped gate. From the rear seat emerged a middle-aged woman and man.

Faith gasped. Her hands went up to her mouth, and her eyes filled with tears.

“Greetings and welcome to Toll Four,” Walter said to the newcomers. “You must be Mr. and Mrs. Harding?”

“Harding?” Ed exclaimed. “Wasn’t that the name of the missing girl on the Illinois State Police flyer?”

“The Missouri State Police have been looking for a Faith Harding all week,” said Fred.

“Oh, Mom...Dad,” Faith called out. “What are you doing here?”

“Walter called us in New York,” Mr. Harding said. “He told us our daughter was with his family.”

“And you’ve come all this way to find me?” Faith asked.

“Faith, we were worried sick about you,” said Mrs. Harding. “We’ve come to take you home.”

“But I thought...” said Faith. And the next thing everyone at the party knew the girl was wrapped in her parent’s arms.

At that moment, the yellow parking lights on Faith’s car came on, bathing the patio in a soft golden glow. Soft music came from the car speakers.

“Time for dancing!” Whitney and Winslow called from the front seat.

Walter threw off his cook’s apron and grabbed Winona by the hand. “Let’s cut the rug, Winona,” he said. And they danced in the middle of the patio.

Other couples joined them--Gene and Jean, Fred and Meg, Ed and Peg, Huckleberry and the UPS lady, Charlene and Mom, Mr. and Mrs. Harding, Faith and Winslow, while Whitney danced with the stuffed panda.

“Walter, your surprise was a real prize for Faith,” Winona said. “You’re wonderful.”

Walter twirled Winona under his arm. “Only the best.”

Not until long past midnight did the guests leave. Mr. and Mrs. Harding drove off with Faith in her convertible. One by one the other partygoers drove off toward Illinois or Missouri. They all agreed it was the best party east of the Mississippi, west of the Mississippi, and above the Mississippi.

## Chapter Twelve

By the time Winona opened the zebra-striped gate the next morning, a line of twenty cars had formed outside the Dutch door. Word had traveled quickly about Winona's Advice Booth, and she was in great demand.

As Winona talked to drivers, Walter and the twins lounged on the patio, reading the newspaper and paperback books.

"I'm reading a book about the Rocky Mountains," said Winslow. "Did you know that ski areas have little cabins that move up and down the side of mountains on wires?"

"Wonderful," said Winona. "Those cabins would be fun to stay in."

"*Ruff! Ruff!*" went Cat.

"I'm reading *The Little House in the Big Woods*," said Whitney.

"Ah, the good old days," said Walter.

At that moment, the phone inside the small cabin rang. Since Winona was busy talking to a man on a motorcycle, Walter rose to answer it.

"Hello, Walter," said a voice. "This is Gene in Number Two."

Walter looked out the window and gave the thumbs-up sign. "What can I do for you, Gene?"

"Walter, I'm worried about Jean and Genie," Gene said. "They went for a walk along the river this morning and were supposed to be at the Toll Plaza by nine. Could you check if you can spot them off your side of the bridge?"

"Just a sec, Gene," said Walter. He hustled to the compact and took a pair of

binoculars from the glove compartment. Leaning over the bridge railing, he scanned the riverbank.

Back on the phone, he reported, "No luck, Gene. I see only the usual fishermen and joggers."

A few minutes later, Ed on his motorcycle and Fred in his squad car drove up to Toll 2. With the Wilsons watching, Gene closed his gate and drove off with Fred.

"Doesn't look good," said Walter.

"I'm telling all my customers to keep an eye out for Jean and Genie," said Winona.

Again, the phone rang, and Walter answered it. It was Charlene. "Have you heard the news?" she said. "Gene found Jean, but Genie's still missing. Ed and Fred have organized two search parties on both sides of the Mississippi."

Walter hung up, looking grim. "We have an emergency, family," he said to the others. "Little Genie has vanished."

Whitney lowered her paperback. "Yesterday, Genie had one thing on her mind," she said.

"Last night that's all she talked about," said Winona.

"*Swimming with the ducks*," the Wilsons said together.

Again, Walter held the binoculars to his eyes. This time instead of searching the riverbanks, he checked the river. Almost at once, he spotted something in the water.

A blue plastic trash barrel, floating on end, was drifting toward the bridge. Walter focused the lenses. Yes, inside the barrel stood a small figure. Genie. The girl appeared unharmed, but the barrel was wobbling and the smallest wave would topple it over.

“There’s no time to dial 911,” said Winona.

“We must rescue Genie ourselves,” said Whitney.

“Quick, grab your inner tube!” Walter called out. “Wilson’s to the rescue!”

### Chapter Thirteen

Within a minute, the four Wilsons were charging down the riverbank, rolling the inner tubes before them.

About fifty yards upriver, the blue barrel bobbed in the water. Genie's head appeared over the top. Even from this distance, the Wilsons could hear her wailing, "Swim! Swim! Swim! Ducks! Ducks!"

Walter stood on the water's edge. "The little tike sounds as healthy as ever," he said.

"If we paddle straight out, I think we can reach her before she floats by," said Winona.

With inner tubes around their middles, the Wilsons leaped into the river. By the time they reached mid-stream, they were directly under the bridge. The blue barrel drifted toward them, only ten yards away.

Genie waved her arms. She screamed, "Swim! Swim! Quack! Quack!"

All at once the barrel tipped. The toddler plunged into the water face first.

"I got her," Walter said, and he vanished underwater.

For several silent seconds, the Mississippi River seemed to stand still. Then, like two fishing bobbers, Walter and Genie's heads popped to the surface side by side. Holding the toddler by the armpits, Walter heaved her onto his inner tube.

The girl clapped her hands and giggled. "I was swimming! I was swimming like a duck!"

Walter spit out some water. "You sank like a stone, kid" he sputtered.

With Genie perched on the front of Walter's inner tube, the Wilsons headed for shore.

Jean and Gene were standing there to greet them. The instant Genie was within arm's reach, they lifted her off the tube and smothered her with hugs and kisses.

"Genie and I were standing on the riverbank, watching ducks," Jean explained. "When I turned, she was gone."

"We saw the whole rescue from the bridge, Walter," Gene said.

"I wanna swim again," Genie said. "I wanna swim like a duck!"

At that moment, a van with a large **11** on its side stopped on the bridge. A man, carrying a TV camera on his shoulder and a woman holding a microphone, ran down the riverbank.

"We're *live*, all *live*, on the banks of the Mississippi River," the woman said into her mike. "Seconds ago, a family floating in inner tubes, pulled a small girl, *alive*, out of the river under the Billy Bob Bridges Memorial Bridge."

The woman pushed her microphone toward the Wilsons who were patting themselves dry with towels.

"We're *live* on Channel Eleven News," she said. "Please tell us your names and where you are from."

"We're the Wilsons," said Walter.

"We're staying at the Toll Plaza," said Winona.

The news reporter's eyes widened. "The Wilsons?" she said. "Aren't you the famous

family who once stayed in an elevator at the San Francisco Hotel? The newspaper called you the *Elevator Family!*"

"That vacation was fantabulous," said Winslow.

"It had its ups and downs," said Whitney.

When the Wilsons returned to Toll 4, the phone didn't stop ringing. Car after car stopped at the Dutch door, carrying people who wanted autographs and pictures of the Elevator Family. Again and again the UPS lady drove up often to deliver gifts and flowers.

Mom parked his lunch wagon next to the patio. "Business is business," he said, and he began selling catfish fried in *Wilson's Famous Catfish Batter*. All afternoon Huckleberry raced up and down the riverbank, bringing more fish.

At six that evening, the governors of Missouri and Illinois appeared at the toll plaza. Both were short gray-haired men in brown suits. The two governors looked remarkably similar.

"Greetings Walter, Winona, Winslow, and Whitney," the Missouri governor said.

"Hello, Wilson family," said Illinois's governor.

"Until today this bridge has been called the Bobby B. Bridges Memorial Bridge," said the first governor.

"But frankly no one in either of our state governments can remember who Bobby Bridges was," said the second governor.

"So in honor of this historic occasion," Missouri's governor went on. "We have both agreed to rename the bridge in your honor."

"From now on, Walter, Winona, Winslow, and Whitney," said Illinois's governor.

“This bridge will be called....”

“The Elevator Family Bridge,” the governors said together.

The Wilson’s final evening at Toll 4 was not as peaceful as they had planned. The zebra-striped gate remained raised and a stream of reporters and tourists drove by to meet the famous family.

“Guests are always welcome at our home,” Walter said to everyone who came.

## Chapter Fourteen

*Honk! Honk!...Beep!...Beep!...Varoom!*

The next morning the four Wilsons rose early and took down their hammocks.

With a nod, Walter removed the HOME SWEAT HOME sampler from the wall. "Until the next excellent place we stay in," he said.

While the twins pulled down the hubcap sculpture and party decorations, Winona posted a new sign in the window:

SORRY CHECKED OUT

"I've talked to the other toll-takers," she said. "They've agreed to listen to any commuter who needs to talk during Rush Hour."

The newspaperman drove by, shouting, "Extra! Extra! Read all about yourselves, Wilsons."

Walter picked up the newspaper that plopped on the patio and smiled at the picture of his family on the front page. The headlines read:

LOCAL "DUCK" GIRL SAVED  
BY ELEVATOR FAMILY.

"Another page for the family scrapbook," he said.

After sweeping out the little cabin and the patio, the Wilsons piled into their green compact.

Cat sat on the curb going, "*Ruff! Ruff!*"

"Come on, boy," said Whitney. "Hop in!"

“You’re a member of this family now,” said Winslow. “We have your hubcap water dish all packed.”

The dog sprang toward the car. He bounded into the back seat next to the twins and the giant panda.

As Walter revved up the motor, Faith’s white convertible pulled up to the gate. Faith was driving and her parents sat in the back.

“We read about the Elevator Family in the morning paper,” Mrs. Harding called out, “Bravo!”

“We’re taking Faith back to New York with us,” said Mr. Harding. “We stopped by to thank your family for getting our family back together.”

“And what will you be doing in New York, Faith?” asked Winona.

“That’s another thing I have to thank the Wilsons for,” said Faith. “You see, while I was staying on this bridge I studied it closely. I marveled at the overhead girders and arches. It’s like a giant puzzle joined together with bolts. My father told me civil engineers design bridges, so next fall I’ll start studying civil engineering at the university.”

“Excellent choice,” said Walter.

“Maybe someday we’ll stay on a bridge built by Faith Harding,” said Winona.

With a wave of her hand, the Hardings drove off.

By now Rush Hour had started. Gene, Jean, and Charlene were busy taking money from morning commuters.

Walter steered the compact over to Charlene’s Dutch door. He held out a five-dollar bill.

“Here’s a small contribution to your Bridge-Buying Fund, Charlene,” he said.

Charlene pushed her hat far back on her head. “Farewell, Wilsons. I’ll miss you at this Toll Plaza,” she said. “Since you came here, drivers have never been friendlier.”

“And we hope our friendship bridges a lifetime, Charlene,” said Winona.

“Westward-ho!” the twins called out, and the green compact started down the highway again.

*“Ruff! Ruff!”* went Cat.

As Walter, Winona, Winslow, and Whitney crossed the bridge, now the Elevator Family Bridge, they broke out in a song,

*“There was a family, who had a dog,  
And Cat was his name-o.  
C-A-T!.C-A-T!.C-A-T!  
And Cat was his name-o.”*